Undefeated

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Undefeated

by TheNerdVoice

Summary

When a car accident ends up being someone with a connection to Serena Campbell, will she be able to keep the secret long enough for said patient to receive the care she requires or will a staff member's curiosity get the best of them?

Long running series with relatively short chapters. Answers the summary question and MUCH after the fact. Tags change as characters are included.

Notes
This story was inspired by a confession to the HolbyCityConfess group on Tumblr which said "Hopefully it's Charlotte Dunn that brings back Bernie or gives Serena some maternal material. Imagine!" I did not make said confession, so it was nice to see someone else was intrigued by the character as well.

**Before we get into the thick of it, let's take care of some housekeeping.**

- I'll let you know now, Bernie isn't going to show up right away. Not for quite a few chapters at least. I don't want anyone to get their hopes up. She will be there, just not yet.

- I try to stay as close to cannon as I possibly can. This includes having Cameron working on Darwin. I've chosen this place because in the reveal pictures that said he was going to be coming back, his scrubs weren't AAU cornflower or Keller berry, they were darker than that. Whether it be a navy or a black, it would still mean Darwin is probably going to be his home department.

- The multiple types of abuse experienced by Charlotte is not a joking matter. If you or someone you love is experiencing Domestic Violence, please reach out. There are people who are waiting and willing to help.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Xavier and Donna rush to treat a patient who gives them little answers.

An patient's eager partner asks Serena for help.

“Female RTC, aged twenty-two. Lacerations to the forearm and head. Probable clavicle fracture and her shoulder looks a bit dislocated. Patient remains unresponsive to questions, yet alert.” Xavier Duval gently pushes on the young patient’s abdomen, “Lets get a line in of fluids and I’m going to need some bloods drawn.”

“What do you need?” Donna Jackson assists, applying a blood pressure monitor to her upper arm as well as a pulse oximeter to her finger. “Charlotte, my name is Donna and this is Dr. Duval. You’re in safe hands.” She offers her a reassuring smile.

Xav feels a bit lower, pausing a moment, “CBC, BAC, LFT, hCG, and I’m going to need a scan.” He glances back to the patient, “Is there a chance you’re pregnant?” Of course, the young woman doesn’t respond, “It helps us plan a course of action. I know you’re scared and that’s okay, but this is something we need to know. An x-ray while pregnant can put your child at greater risk for childhood cancers due to the radiation.” He sighs a little, “Put a rush on the bloods, please, Donna.”

“Ric should be out of surgery shortly. Ms. Campbell is due in at any point now.” She nods, inserting the line into the young woman’s bloodied arm. “Your partner, I believe is in the hall. Would you like for me to get him?” Noticing the look change to fear on the young woman’s face, she nods, “Okay. It’s okay. I’ll tell him that he can’t see you now. I can use my nurse-powers that way.”

The doctor smirks a bit, amused by his nurse’s ability to put her patients at ease. “Let’s play this safe. I’ll give her an abdominal ultrasound to rule out any fluid build up, which will also give us the answer to that hCG. I need imaging done on that shoulder though.” He nods, seeing as the patient’s significant other attempts to push his way into the room, “You can’t be in here, mate.”

“I can. I pay taxes just like everyone else. This is my fiance.” A buff, tallish man with a set of light hazel eyes and olive toned skin, calls into the room. He tries to push past the other people trying to keep him out, “Char, you okay? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, but the doctor said that you need to wait outside and I’m inclined to agree with him.”
Donna turns, meeting eyes with the man, “Or I can call security, your choice.”

The man stops struggling, sighing, “I’ll be back later, Char. Everything will be alright.” He leaves in a huff, putting his hands up in resignation to the staffers blocking him from the room.

“Family member?” Serena Campbell just so happens to enter through the double doors at that moment, her black wool jacket wrapped around her and leather satchel in hand. She notices his slight nod before she continues, “I can assure you that our AAU staff members go above and beyond the call of duty every waking hour. You haven’t anything to worry about.”

He nods a little, “Thank you for your kind words.” He outstretches his muscular arm to offer her his hand, “Anders Hero, my fiance is in there.”

She nods a little, taking his handshake, “Serena Campbell. Let me just set these things down and I’ll go check on your partner.” The consultant enters her office, noticing the young man hanging around the doorway.

“We were a car accident. They hit her side.” Anders explains, nodding a little. He’s a bit older, in his forties, but his muscular athletic build making it possible for him to appear younger. “I just...I just want to know if she’s going to be okay. That’s all...and they tossed me out.”

“Well, they would have done so for many reasons, but just know that without you in the room, it means they can give your partner their undivided attention.” Serena sighs a little, wishing for a moment’s peace before jumping feet first into her work day. “You’ll need to stay out here, but I’ll send someone out to you when we’re able.”

“Thanks, Ms. Campbell.”

She gives him a wink before pushing her way into the room, “What do we have here?” She listens to her registrar run through things, watching as Donna leaves, but finds herself staring at the young patient’s familiar face. “What’s her name?”

“This is Charlotte...Charlotte Dunn.” Xav nods, “I’m waiting for them to bring the portable ultrasound in so that we can have a better look at her abdomen...and rule out the need for hCG bloods.” He quickly makes eye contact with his superior, “Ms. Campbell?”
“Okay, that sounds like a plan.” Serena folds her arms, knowing this is her Bernie’s flesh and blood. She begins thinking of all the times Bernie attempted to call her daughter when she was in town and they would go unanswered. She feels her chest for her penlight, but realizes she had forgotten it in her office, “Mr. Duval, your torch, please?” She holds her hand out, moving closer once the registrar moves away and places his device in her hand. “Charlotte, my name is Serena Campbell. I’m the chief consultant on AAU. Have you eaten recently?”

“She hasn’t been answering questions...but her eyes say all that needs to be said.”

“I’d say.” They were Bernie’s eyes. Everything looked like her mother, with exception to the hair, which was just a darker tone of the blond she’s inherited from her mother. She shines the device in the young woman’s eyes, checking for bleeding. Ever since her own daughter’s accident, this is one of the things she checks first with every RTC brought in. Out of habit, really. “No bleeding in the back of the eyes, I’d say the head imaging can be held off.”

Xav pauses, “So her periorbital hematomas are from before the accident.” He says quietly to himself, garnering the consultant’s attention, he shakes his head for her to continue with the patient.

“Let’s get her a sling for the arm and stitch up these other few wounds.” Serena brings her stethoscope from around her neck, placing the ear pieces to her ears, “Are you able to sit up, Charlotte?”

“She has at least two broken ribs. That should be quite-”

“Okay, side roll, then.” She lets one of the other nurses help, “This will only be for a moment.” She places the doppler to the young woman’s back, listening for breath sounds, “Has she been given any pain management?”

“Not yet. I want to do the ultrasound first.” Xav explains, noticing there’s something the consultant is hiding from him. He places a hand on Serena’s arm, pointing to various bruises covering the young woman’s back, some old and some new. “After the ultrasound, I’d really like to discuss treatment options with you, if that’s okay. I could use additional input from my own.”

“Smashing idea, Dr. Duval.” Serena helps the young woman roll back over to her back, just looking at her eyes, “Um...” She swallows, realizing she’s losing herself again as she picks her head up quickly, “Let’s get this neck brace off...I don’t think we have anything-” She pauses, seeing the definite marks around the young woman’s neck of attempted strangulation, “-to worry about.”
“He’s in the hall.” Xav says very quietly near the consultant’s ear, downcast.

“I’m aware.” Serena nods, “I’ll take care of it.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

A patient's reaction throws Xavier for a loop, causing him to seek the reassurance of a consultant.

A young man demands information about his partner, but are his concerns as genuine as he makes them out to be?

Chapter Notes

I'm a visualizer as I read. I like to see what other writers have in mind for their original characters and I imagine you guys may as well. So, for the role of Anders Hero, I've had in mind Theo Theodoridis circa 2007. I know that's rather specific, but...trust me on this.

“Ultrasound showed no fluid in the abdomen, but does show a positive pregnancy. Not too far. Maybe ten weeks.” Xav explains, standing in the consultant’s office, offering the consultant the tablet computer, “She still isn’t speaking with anyone. I’ve tried. There’s something going on between her and the boyfriend. Doesn’t want him in the room at all.”

“He’s beating her. It’s rather obvious, Dr. Duval. You’re allowed to say it.” Serena take the tablet from him, “Bloods are relatively normal. Low iron, but that’s an easy fix. Normal liver function.” She nods, “Problem is, he’s going to continue staying outside the room. We cannot just phone the police about this.”
“He’s been asking staff when he’ll be able to see her. I’ve asked Donna to stay with her, make sure he doesn’t try to come in. Donna says she still hasn’t spoken. I’ve even assessed her jaw and mouth just to make sure, but...there’s nothing physically keeping her from speaking.” He shakes his head, “It does worry me greatly.”

“Ditto.” She closes the top flap of the tablet, offering it back to him, “How about I give it a shot?” She begins to stand, nodding to him, “I don’t believe she’s eaten today and we could both use some lunch.” The newly blonde consultant runs her hand through her hair, “Schedule an MRI for that shoulder. There’s no doubt that the clavicle is fractured, but I’d like to know just how broken it is.”

“So, would it be a good idea for her to eat if we need to take her into theater?” Xav offers.

“Xavier, she’s pregnant. When we’re treating broken bones on a pregnant patient, we’re treating two patients.” Serena explains, “how did she take the information of her pregnancy? Did she know previously?”

“She kept her eyes closed, honestly. Uh...crying, but...she wouldn’t wipe the tears away. They just...fell.” The young woman’s reaction bothered him a bit. “This is my first...patient with these issues all together at one time.” He says honestly, “I apologize if I’m...not doing something properly.”

She didn’t expect for him to be affected the way he seems. “You’re doing a great job, Mr. Duval.” She gently touches him on the bicep. “If I were you, I would put in a request for a Gynie consult. I’d rather be safe than sorry. Auto collisions raise the possibilities of miscarriages or issues with gestation. That’s what we need to focus on right now. That young woman in the bed, as well as her child. Not the arse in the hall. Clear?”

“Crystal.” Xav finds himself smirking that she feels the need to reassure him. “Would you like for me to run to Pulse’s for you both or-”

“No, no. I’ll let her order something with my mobile. I reckon she may be more willing to type a message to me instead of...vocalizing it.” Serena winks to him, “I can be rather clever, you know.”

“Absolutely. What should I tell the boyfriend?”

“I doubt he would listen to you if you told him to go home. I’m just waiting for him to...threaten staff. As...awful as that sounds. Then I can call security.” She pauses, “I feel like there should be
“I could...use my charm.” Xav waves his eyebrows a little, opening the door to the consultant’s office, only to be met with the man in question.

“Please, I need to see my fiance.” Anders immediately takes place next to the registrar, “Is she dead? I saw you all taking in different monitors and things. Is she...dying? I don’t understand why I can’t just see her? I don’t even need to say anything. I just want to-”

“Mr. Hero, you need to stay out here. We don’t need you getting in the way while we help her...breathe.” He thinks of something, anything that could render as a reason for keeping it out. “Really, if I were you, I’d just go on home. Get some sleep.” He nods, “You did say that you were in the accident with her, didn’t you? Were you assessed?”

“I don’t need to be bloody assessed. I’m fine.” His gaze becomes more intense, “I need to see my fiance. She would want to see me.”

“I’m sure that’s true, but we need to do it this way now. I’m putting her first.” Xav nods, “and I can tell you that you probably won’t be seeing her at any point today.” He checks his wristwatch, “Visiting hours are over in twenty minutes and we’re still trying to keep her stable.”

“She could die without...what if I’m not able to tell her I love her and she...doesn’t make it?” Anders shakes his head a moment. “Just...a couple minutes alone with her. That’s all I-”

He reaches the nurses’ station, “I’ve already told you that wasn’t going to happen.” Xav notices as Serena Campbell steps away from her office, but not in the direction of the young woman’s secluded room. “It’s nothing against you and I doubt anything will happen to her, but we need to keep things...calm and quiet for her.”

Serena studies the vending machine, trying to think of what candy it was that Bernie said she used to buy her children all the time. “Come on.” She whispers to herself, finally inserting the few coins and touching the buttons on the side for her selection. She smirks to herself, amused that she was able to remember. Surely, this would reassure Charlotte. This had to.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Serena helps her patient realize her identity, the only way she knows how.

Refusing to contact anyone in her family for support, Charlotte continues to conceal the truth of her accident.

Charlotte Dunn stares toward the ceiling of the hospital room. Things could not be worse at this moment. The pain radiating from her shoulder area intense. Of course, she was pregnant. She was afraid to say anything to Anders, but she had her suspicions. However, she was glad the staff has managed to keep him away. She knows they will not be able to forever.

Serena enters, single bag of candy in hand. She motions with a tilt of the head for the nurse that had been sitting with her to leave. Waiting for the door to secure once more, she nears the bed. “So, we’ve gotten Anders to leave...and I thought maybe you might be hungry.” She nods, offering her mobile to the young woman, food ordering app open. “Order whatever you’d like, on me.”

The young woman appears relieved for the first time since being brought in, eyes glazed over with sheer pain, but she’d never admit it. She licks her lips, realizing only at that time that they’re split. She shakes her head toward the woman’s phone.

“I thought you’d say that.” She offers the candy in her hand, “Milky buttons?”

Charlotte begins to smile a bit, “My Mum used to...” She pauses, realizing it’s the first time she’s spoken all day. She clears her throat, wining with pain radiates from her side, tears threatening to fall from her eyes. She instinctively smells the package, amusing herself with her own ridiculousness, “My mum was in the military and...when she was about to ship off, she’d spray a bag of these with her perfume and leave them under my pillow.” She furrows her brow slightly, smelling the bag again.

“Your mother has never been one to keep things all in one place. She had a bottle of her perfume here in the desk, a bottle at home, a bottle in the car. Makes things ever so slightly easier when I miss her.” Serena shakes her head, “Charlotte...I don’t know what’s going on, or why you’ve refused to speak to staff all the day long, but-”

“You’re my Mum’s Serena?”
“That I am.” She answers gently, “And she would have my head if she knew I wasn’t feeding you properly. So, I say again, order whatever you wish.” Serena offers her mobile again, “On me.” When the young woman appears unsure, she continues, “Oh, for god’s sake, I’m a surgeon. This is a raindrop in the sea for me. I insist.”

Charlotte gently takes the woman’s mobile from her hand, “I...haven’t had a mobile in years.”

Serena hums, it was starting to make sense now, “So that would explain why you weren’t taking your mother’s calls.”

“I didn’t know. Anders and I share a mobile.” Her voice soft, distant, “I don’t get to use it often.”

“He’s quite...pushy.” She moves to the corner of the room, lifting the vinyl covered chair and carrying it to the side of the bed, “and we can’t help but notice how...frightened you seem when he’s mentioned.”

“It’s nothing, it’s um...” Charlotte shakes her head slightly, “I could really use some water. Saline is lovely, but-”

“I’ll get you a glass in a moment.”

“You, honestly, wouldn’t understand.” She pauses. “I...haven’t seen my family in over a year. My Mum...even longer. I imagine she probably believes I hate her.” The young woman leaves the mobile alone, not able to focus on it long enough. “I don’t, by the way. She disagreed when I told her that I was going to get married and have a family. He’s...a friend of my father’s.”

“But you don’t seem happy.” Serena listens to the young woman intently, even her voice was similar to that of her mother, deep and distinct. Something one feels in their chest with each word. “Charlotte, would you like me to phone your father or Cameron? He’s just upstairs in another unit. I’m certain he would rush down to see you.”

“No, no. They can’t know I’m here.” Charlotte answers quickly, “No. This is all going to blow over with Anders. It’s fine. If they come down, he’s just going to be angry with me and I’d rather that not happen.” Finally a tear falls and she’s quick to lift her hand to wipe it away, “Cross because you lot let them see me before him.”
“He can try me.” Her voice deep, storming with anger. “Do you remember what happened during the accident?”

She remembers it just fine. She brought up wanting to go back to University, which he vehemently refused. He said she wouldn’t have time for it with the children. She didn’t need to. When the turning traffic started, he drove into the oncoming automobiles, ensuring that she would be hit. “No…it was just one of those weird things, I bet. Nothing too…noteworthy.”

Serena can tell she’s lying. She has that same look on her face that Bernie gets when she’s trying to hold a secret. “We’ve found bruises, Charlotte. On your back, neck, and arms…consistent with abuse. I can’t, in good conscious, let you walk back into that situation…or even release you just yet. I know he isn’t going to take care of you in regards to your overall well being.”

He won’t. Charlotte knows he won’t. “He’s a very caring man when given the opportunity.”

“Stop making excuses, Charlotte.” She meets the young woman’s eyes, “You’re pregnant. Nearing the end of your first trimester. I want you to think about all the times that man has lashed out at you. All the times he’s grabbed you, punched you…burned you.” Serena motions to a mark on the back of the young woman’s hand. “And even if he doesn’t do the same to your child, they will learn that it’s okay for a man to treat a woman in that way. That abuse is something natural when it very much is not.”

“He has everything...controls everything.” She explains, worry filling her voice, “I have nothing.”

“So we’ll take care of that, but you cannot go back home with him.” Serena shakes her head a little, “If you don’t want your father and brother to know, then you’ll stay with me.” Her tone matter-of-fact, simple. “Anders won’t know where you’ve gone. He’ll look for you with your father and brother.”

“Cam doesn’t like him. Never did.” Charlotte smirks, ruefully.

“He’s an intelligent young man.”

“Terrible judge of character though.” She winces as she attempts to move, “Dated a friend of the family once...who was...skeevy at best.”
Serena smiles a little to herself, thinking back to the first time she had met the young man while he was a patient. Also after a car accident. “I don’t believe he was incorrect this time though.” She studies the young woman.

“I can’t live with you, Serena. Though I appreciate the offer, I would be imposing.” Charlotte replies quietly, “We hardly know one another. Do you always ask strangers to live with you?” She lifts her head, “Stragglers you pick up along the side of the road or just ones you meet in hospital? Where does it stop?” Her tone dry, teasing the woman a little.

“That Wolfe sense of humor, I see.”

It’s been a while since she’s heard that and it brings a tear to her eye again, “Yeah.” She whispers.

Serena offers a reassuring, closed mouth smile as she reaches over to take a gentle hold of the young woman’s better hand. She picks up the mobile again, realizing the page Charlotte left on, but never happened to submit it, “Chicken stir fry? I’ll take the same.”

“You don’t need to be nice to me just because I’m your girlfriend’s daughter.” Charlotte moves her eyes to the woman’s hand in hers.

“Don’t let it get out that I’m being nice to you at all, it would ruin my image around here.” Serena notices Charlotte’s smirk with the corner of her eye, continuing to focus on completing the order with her mobile, “I’m being nice to you because I want to be. You may not know me very well just yet, but...I hope to change that. To me, you’re family. Just like Bernie has always treated my nephew as family.” She finally looks over to the young woman, “Your brother knows that very well, but uses it for the comedic value more than anything worthwhile.” When she receives a look of slight confusion from the young woman, she continues, “Refers to me as his step-mother when given the opportunity.” Serena hums a low chuckle, amused with the idea herself as well, “Though he does feel the need to buy me a drink if we’re round to Albie’s at the same time.”

“Quite the gentleman.”

Serena slowly leans back in the chair, “If he doesn’t like Anders, why wouldn’t you want me to contact him about you being here?”

“Cameron has a habit of wanting to do the right thing, which isn’t always the smart thing. He’s done
it ever since we were kids.” Charlotte gives a subtle groan as she tries to adjust her position, “I’m afraid he would try to confront Anders, and while I have no doubt that my brother would give it his all, he wouldn’t win in that fight.” She pauses, “He would also tell my father, who would, in turn, tell Anders if I decide to run off. So, it’s all back to square one.”

“Understandable.” She nods, “What about your Mum?”

“What about her?” Charlotte asks softly, “Is she even here?”

“Nairobi.” Serena corrects, “that doesn’t mean she wouldn’t love to see you...speak with you.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sure she’s busy.” The young woman glances over to her mother’s partner, “She’s always busy. You’ll learn that soon enough.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Xavier outlines the course of treatment he's decided for his patient.

Staffers scramble when Charlotte's abusive boyfriend manages entry to her room, causing further injury.

“She has an anterior dislocation, paired with a fractured clavicle.” Xavier folds his arms over his chest, showing the tablet computer to Serena as they stand at the nurses’ station. “Nothing wrong with the scapula, but there does appear to be some strain to the rotator cuff. The quicker this is adjusted, the better.”

“And what do you believe would be the best course of action, Dr. Duval?” Serena looks through the various slides of the MRI given to her patient this morning. “Keeping in mind what we discussed before and knowing that pregnant women may sometimes have a slower healing cycle.”

“I believe, since the pain medication we’re able to give her is moderate at best, that we place her under general anesthesia, relocate the shoulder manually, and repair the clavicle surgically. Mostly for the reasons you’ve stated before.” He nods, “Should be a quick adjustment. Minimal invasiveness. Quick healing time.”

“Very good.” She offers him a quick smile, “Schedule the theater, I will supervise.”

Xav watches her a moment, “Would that be a good idea, Ms. Campbell? You and the patient have gotten rather...close.” He pauses, “I mean, she only just got here yesterday, but...she opened up to you. Something you said to her now has her speaking with other staff and even appearing more relaxed.”

“I don’t really know what I could possibly tell you, Xav.” Serena hands back the tablet, picking up a stack of folders. “Would you like for me to inform her of her treatment plans, or would you like to?”

He nods a little, “I can do it.” Xav knew something was a bit odd about this whole thing. He turns, noticing the young woman’s partner enter the room. He sighs a little, rushing over.

“You lot lied to me.” Anders says incredulously to the nurse sitting next to the bed who was now in
front of him, telling him to leave. He motions toward his fiance. “You made me think she was on her deathbed and she’s completely fine. What are you playing at?”

“Mr. Hero, you need to go.” Xav opens the door to the room.

“No, no, I won’t. Charlotte, let’s go. I’ll take you to a private hospital. You’ll receive proper care from people who don’t lie every chance they get.” The man’s voice nearly at a hiss. When the room falls silent, he glances over toward his fiance in the bed, “Charlotte, what don’t you understand? I said let’s go.” He smirks ever so slightly when she begins to do as told, setting off various monitors.

“Ms. Dunn is my patient and she is about to go into surgery. She is not released and will need to sign papers if she plans to leave against medical advice.” He glances over to the young woman who was visibly both in tremendous pain, and frightened. “If you want her to leave, she’s going to need to fill out papers first.”

Anders’ chest rises and falls with silent fury, “Fine.” When the man backs away from him a little, “And I want to have some time alone with my fiance. We have much to talk about.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that.” Xav shakes his head, “If you want things to be done the way they should be, in order to allow a private hospital to even accept her as a patient, we will need your help in regards to sending her patient file to the correct location.”

The man shakes his head slowly, chuckling almost bitterly, “Unbelievable.” He moves next to the bed, putting his hand to her upper arm, pulling at her a bit on her injured side. Raising an eyebrow when she screams out in pain, “Seems you don’t know what you’re doing. I’d better contact our lawyer.”

Serena stands at the door as security staff enter, “Mr. Hero, you’re going to need to leave...before I call the police.”

“I did nothing wrong.” Anders shakes his head, glancing to his fiance, “Tell them, Charlotte. I love you and you know I only want what is best for you. Tell them.” He aggressively pulls his arm away from the member of security when they attempt to escort him out. When she doesn’t say anything, still writhing in pain, “Charlotte...” He pushes at her arm again, receiving another scream.

“Police it is.” The newly blonde consultant gives him a look that could simply set a man on fire if given the chance.
He chuckles bitterly, backing away, “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.” Anders takes his leave after pulling away from the security team, shaking his head.

Serena remains calm, yet it’s obvious she’s fuming at the man. “Prep Ms. Dunn for theater. I’m afraid he may have exacerbated her injury. I need to phone Ms. Tate in case we have a problem.” She turns away, moving toward her office, “Bastard.” She mumbles to no one in particular as she retreats to her office, across from the room she was just in. Serena pauses after she closes the door to the consultants’ office, taking a deep breath. Something has to give.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Xavier raises his concerns with Ric when he believes Serena may be too close to a patient.

Knowing from experience, Ric helps Serena understand what she needs to do.

Chapter Notes

With the first 5 chapters of this story posted, I'm going to be switching to a posting schedule. Every Saturday or Sunday and then every Wednesday. Not because I haven't written them yet, I have, they're sitting in my Google Drive. Suspense is fun!

Serena sits next to the young woman, watching her closely in Recovery. Every intake of breath and exhale, the soft sounds of the heart and fetal monitors keeping her present in the moment. While she scrubbed in for surgery, after ending her phone call with Abigail Tate, a part of her wanted to reach out to Bernie. Just to let her know that she would take care of things. Just to let her know that she need not worry. Just to hear her voice. She leans forward when she notices the young woman’s eyelids begin to flutter as she the anesthesia slowly wears off. Serena gently takes her hand, leaning against the bed rail.

Xavier watches her for a moment from the opposite side of the area, furrowing his brow. Something was just off with all of this. There was more than she was letting on in regards to this particular patient. He makes his way to the elevator, pressing the button to return to the AAU. The best idea he has is to ask her best friend, the man with whom she shared her consultant position. Rumors flew around the hospital about them, but he knew they were just friends. Knocking on the consultant office door once he returns to the unit, he hears the man’s approval of entry, closing the door behind himself.

“Mr. Duval.” Ric raises an eyebrow toward him, removing the glasses from his face as he was going through paperwork. Better for it to be completed before taking on too many patients that you forget what you need to write for whom. “I do hope surgery went well.”

“It did. Swimmingly, actually.” The young registrar nods, “I must admit, I’ve grown used to you looking over my shoulder. Ms. Campbell’s presence was...interesting to say the least.”
“Ms. Campbell is an incredibly qualified surgeon—"

“No, that isn’t that at all.” Xav sighs a little, attempting to find the words, “You and Ms. Campbell are incredibly close. I thought maybe—” He pauses, “maybe you could tell me if the name Charlotte Dunn might mean anything to her. Now, I don’t expect for you to know everyone she has ever come into contact—"

“Absolutely.” Ric nods, smirking a little to himself, “Is that your patient’s identity?” They were playing it quiet about the location of the young woman within the building. Seeing the registrar’s nod, he continues, “Who else do you know, in this very building, with the last name Dunn?”

“Uh.” He folds his arms over his chest, taking a moment to think, “Cameron Dunn on Darwin. Nice guy.”

“Correct.” The older man knows his registrar needs to figure this out on his own, “and is the name we have heard him call Ms. Campbell many times now?”

“Stepmother.” It quickly dawns on Xav’s face in the way of a knowing smirk, “She’s her partner’s daughter.” When he receives a wink from the man sitting there, he begins to smile a bit more, “It all makes sense. I should contact him to tell him that his sister’s here.”

“Let’s not jump to anything.” Ric pushes himself up straighter in his desk chair, “have you updated her patient file within the network yet?” He motions toward his computer with a pointed finger before reaching down to use his mouse to open the appropriate application, “I want a better idea about this case before I go and speak with her. I’ll let you know, only after then, if you should phone Dr. Dunn on Darwin.”

“It came in as an RTC, but turned into an abuse case.” He explains quickly, eager to give him the gist of it, “the file is up-to-date mostly. I just haven’t added her surgery information in just yet.”

The consultant presses a few buttons on the keyboard, finding the patient file in question. Ric takes his time to read the registrar’s comments added and look over the scans. It reminds him of his daughter, Jess, a bit. Just another statistic, he knows. He wonders if Marcus Dunn knows anything about any of this. “Partner is aggressive?”

Xav nods slowly, “Yes, he also exasperated her injury by pushing on her arm when we asked him to leave. Ms. Campbell called on security to remove him, managing to effectively ban him from the
hospital during Ms. Dunn’s stay.”

“That’s a start.” He sighs a bit, closing the file. Ric slowly leans back in his desk chair, lifting his head when he sees the hospital bed of the patient in question pass in the hall while looking through the window. “You should go. I’m betting Serena is going to come in here shortly and she’ll grow suspicious if she sees us speaking like this. Go on.” He nods his head a little toward the door, watching as the registrar leaves without question. Left to his devices, he absently brings his hand to his mouth, rubbing the knuckle of his index finger along his lower lip in thought.

Ric knows his friend incredibly well. They had started together when Serena Campbell arrived on Keller ward over six years ago, butting heads and testing egos. When they realized a friendship had blossomed from their time spent together, they decided, unanimously, that it shouldn’t ever be tainted with a romantic relationship. They were happy to have one another as a sounding board and confidant. The same happened when Bernie Wolfe had arrived on Keller and Serena was moved to AAU. Again, they disagreed over many things, but mostly because they were both excellent at their jobs and refused to admit defeat over one another. He wouldn’t admit it at the time, but he enjoyed the challenge. Their relationship grew to a friendship and when Serena admitted her feelings for Bernie to him, he was shocked and thrilled for them both at the same time. They deserved one another. They would bring out the best in one another.

When Elinor died, he understood Serena’s pain. There were so many things he had wanted to say to her in an attempt at soothing her suffering, but he knew he never could. Every parent must deal with the loss of a child in their own way. His reaction to his son’s death was different from her reaction to the loss of her daughter. He knew the only one that could help her mend was Bernie, and he told her as such.

Their friendship changed again since she went to Nairobi, Bernie would contact him to check on Serena if they had an off conversation, if Serena seemed anxious or upset. If she was going to visit and wanted to ensure Serena’s location in order to surprise her. Bernie trusts him to look after Serena for her and he would do so anyway. This time is no different from any others.

The opening of the office door snaps him out of his thought process, the woman he thought it would be. “Xav said surgery went well.”

“Oh, yes, splendidly.” Serena lifts her hand to tuck her hair behind her ear from its resting place on top of her ear, she combs it with her nails at her temple absently. A nervous tick of sorts. “Patient pulled through with flying colors, not that I ever had any doubt.” She runs her hands down the front of her magenta colored, flowing blouse, having just changed. “I’m about to go and check on her, actually. She was just brought down from Recovery.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that Bernie’s daughter was brought in?” Ric tilts his head to the side,
casually clasping his hands across his lap, elbows resting on the rests of his office chair. “I could have taken over care for her. You’re family.”

“Not really, not technically.” She shakes her head, folding her arms across her chest.

“Serena-”

“I need to be the one to do this.” Tears form in Serena’s eyes, though she refuses to acknowledge them. She clears her throat, lifting her head to finally look him in the eye after a moment. “She’s alone and needs mending...I do that on a daily basis for strangers. I can do so now for her.”

“Why not call Marcus or Cameron?” Ric leans forward, rising to stand in front of her, “I’ve taken a look at her file. This is too much for you to take on by yourself. Let someone help you. I can help you.”

“That isn’t what she wants.”

“I understand that, but Jess was in the same situation eight years ago that Charlotte is in now.” He exhales slowly, “What happens when she’s ready to leave with him? What happens when she steps through those doors to the car park and he’s waiting there with his car to take her back to the situation you just attempted to get her away from?”

Serena shakes her head, “I’ve already called Abigail. She’s agreed that we should keep her as a patient longer. If we need to move her to Keller to spare room here, I’ve already been given approval.”

Ric looks his friend in the eyes again, gently putting his hands on her upper arms, “We can’t keep her here for the next thirty weeks.”

“We can if I ask Fleur to suggest it.”

He sighs, backing away from her again and taking his seat. The room falls silent and he speaks up after a couple moments, “Why doesn’t she want to say anything to Marcus?”

“He is friends with her boyfriend. They were friends long before she and the boyfriend started
dating.” Serena has run through all these facts in her head, trying to find a hole in them so she could have an excuse to contact them, “Can’t tell Cameron because he will either tell his father of her whereabouts or go straight after the boyfriend himself, and I agree with Charlotte, that’s a fight he isn’t going to win.”

“Your place?” Ric raises an eyebrow, “It would be the best case scenario. I doubt this guy would put two and two together in order to both realize exactly who you are to her and where you live.”

“I’ve tried. She declined.”

“Try again...and again and again. Wear her down.” Ric looks to her sincerely, “It’s the difference between life and death for her now, Serena...and I know you have the capability to and will do what needs to be done.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Leah inserts herself into a private situation, looking for answers.

Fleur discovers that not all the Wolfes are bad, but will she be able to convince her young patient that Serena can be fully trusted?

Chapter Notes

So, here's another chapter. I know it just talked about a posting schedule and all that...and I'm going to do that, but there's a lot written on my Google Drive for this and it's driving me a bit crazy. No pun intended. So, this week, you'll get chapters on both Saturday and Sunday.

Also, I do apologize if I've gotten Fleur wrong at all. I've attempted to do research on the character, but there's like...nothing available. So my only knowledge of her is contained in Wiki articles and when she was around to deliver Jason's daughter. Sorry about that, I honestly, truly tried.

Leah Faulkner cautiously assesses the patient in bed, trying not to wake her, but knowing she probably would. She knows Serena had went off to the canteen to obtain a large cup of coffee for herself, but she needed to understand just why this young woman was taking up all her time. She tried to access the files, only to see that they were locked by Ric Griffin. Minimal allowances made to certain staffers and other consultants. Seeing the younger woman’s large brown eyes looking up at her after a moment, she offers a gentle smile, “Hello, Ms. Dunn. I’m Dr. Leah Faulkner.”

Charlotte watches the young woman, “What happened to Duval?”

“We all need to go home sometime.” She tilts her head from side to side, large blue eyes taking in the attractive younger woman’s rough appearing face. “They haven’t given you a good cleaning just yet...except for the wounds. Would you like for me to help you with that?” She doesn’t wait for her patient to answer before she continues, “Simple saline, cotton, and an emesis basin...I know they’re around here somewhere.” The woman begins to move around the room, looking through cabinets.

There’s something about this young woman. Something off, though she can’t quite put her finger on. “You really don’t need to worry about that. Serena said she was going to help me wash up proper in
another day or two...once they remove the dressings.”

“Sure, but we can take care of simple things like your face.” Leah offers her a kind smile, “Your arm.”

“Can I just...can you just get me a glass of water instead?” Charlotte watches her. When the F1 appears confused, she continues, “They aren’t...dirty. They’re bruised.” It takes her much to be able to say it, even causing tears to form in her eyes, but she doesn’t shed them. “You’re a doctor, Ms. Leah Faulkner. You should know the difference.”

The blonde nods quickly, exhaling as she places her hands on her hips, “I do...I just...” Leah moves closer to the bed, “People are so afraid to ask questions around here. I’m not one of those people.” She focuses on the patient, “So, we just kind of wanted to know how you know Sere-” The F1 pauses, “how you know Ms. Campbell.”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course not, I apologize.” Leah’s tone downcast, like a child who was caught passing folded paper notes in class.

Charlotte watches her, the room falling silent after a moment before she breaks said silence, “Does Serena know that you usually call her by her first name?” She picks up on the F1’s blushing cheeks, “Or is there something else going on between the two of you?”

She lightly chortles to herself, “Of course not.”

“But you want there to be.”

“It really doesn’t matter what I want.” Leah shakes her head, moving closer to the young woman’s bed again, lifting the too slim patient file from the white metal basket on the footboard, “I just don’t like, nor understand, secrets in regards to patient care.”

“Secrets?” Charlotte lifts the brow that wasn’t near the stitches on her forehead, “I don’t understand.”
She has a habit of accidently doing this. Of saying too much when things don’t need to be said in the first place. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t understand.” She says again, a bit more loudly, only to be interrupted by a rapt at the door. Charlotte stops, trying to calm herself down as she looks away from the woman when the door leading to the hall opens. Her gaze quickly turns to that of the person entering after a moment, her eyes a bit more wide than previously.

Fleur Fanshawe enters casually into the room, as if she owns the whole damned hospital, much thicker patient file tucked under her arm. She glances to the F1, “Well, aren’t you a sweet treat…”

Leah quickly extends her hand toward the woman, a smile on her face, “Leah Faulkner, F1. I’m at your disposal if you need me to be.”

“Just…stand there and look pretty for a few moments. Shouldn’t be too hard for you.” The maroon haired gynecological and obstetrics consultant raises an interested eyebrow toward the young woman before turning her attention to the patient in the bed, “So, Rena tells me the smallest Wolfe cub is set to have one of her own.”

Charlotte finds herself beginning to chuckle, only to groan from the pain radiating from her side. “Doesn’t sound like something Serena would say.” They’ve spoken in depth in the day since her arrival, about everything and nothing. Mostly about the things she’s missed and how people are coping in the world. Anything except her fiancé and her family, with exception to her childhood. They ate a bag of Milky Buttons together. Just relaxing for a change, the first time she’s been able to in far too long.

“Fractured ribs are never fun.” Fleur absently hands the F1 the large file by dropping it into her hands, pushing down the white top of the red antibacterial container before rubbing her hands together. “Hands will be frigid…like my heart.”

Leah bites her lip a little, deciding to take the time to read the parts of the patient history and doctors’ notes that were sealed away by a senior staff password. Patient displays intense trepidation during any mention of her alleged abuser. Police have not been contacted, alleged abuser left hospital on his own accord when escorted by hospital security and was told he would not be permitted entry while patient remains within Holby City hospital. She finds her eyebrows furrowed, not understanding why the police weren’t contacted. Maybe it was just an oversight, now that she understands why Serena was so focused on this girl.

“Is it a requirement that you can only be a doctor with frigid hands?” Charlotte glances town to the
consultant’s hands feeling across her lower abdomen, not lifting her head too much since it hurt her shoulder, its sore as well, but she keeps a stoic face.

“It is.” Fleur smirks a little, “Now, I need to shove a probe up you to get a clearer picture. That way I don’t need to push on your abdomen again. I know you’re probably sore, love.”

The young woman hums softly, agreeing with her statement, “You have no idea.”

“I have some.” She pauses, “this is going to feel a bit odd, but I’ll tell you a story during it so that it fills the awkward silence.”

“Not even going to buy me dinner first?” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, highly amused by the woman. She tries to help her adjust the sheet a bit to give her better access to her nether regions, but groans a bit when she moves too much.

“Oh, you are absolutely delicious.” Fleur grins a bit as she pulls on a pair of gloves, “I have it. You just relax, love.” She changes the transducer heads on the machine, making sure its actually sanitized and an extra hygienic barrier covering was over top of it. She turns to the F1, who she knows has been just reading through the file instead of paying attention, “If you don’t want to be here during this, we would understand.”

Leah jumps ever so slightly, closing the file quickly. “Well, if I’m going to be a general surgeon, I need to be aware and prepared to do anything.” She clears her throat a little, setting the file into the basket at the foot of the bed before moving up next to the patient in the bed. “I’ll take all the experience I can get.”

“Why are we going to do it this way, Dr. Faulkner?”

The blonde thinks for a moment, “Patient has endured abdominal trauma, as can be seen by the various bruises covering her tummy and broken ribs sustained. There may be scar tissue present, which this method would completely bypass since it can be difficult to obtain a clear reading at the tenth week of gestation with a regular transducer probe in the first place.”

“Very good.” Fleur nods, quickly winking to her patient before inserting the probe and focusing on the ultrasound monitor next to them, “when your Mum was here last, she was quite jealous of me. Threatened me with her knowledge of thirteen ways to kill a person.” She nods, “if she liked it rough, all she needed to do was say so.”
There was no possible way to make this comfortable. Charlotte focuses on the monitor, “Why was she jealous?”

“Serena is an incredibly beautiful woman. I like to let her know that as often as I possibly can. Why wouldn’t I?”

Leah folds her arms over her chest, “does it bother her when you do that?”

“Leah fancies her as well.” Charlotte explains, her dry sense of humor coming through, “and finding out I’m her partner’s daughter has probably put a bit of a kink in her plans.”

“I never said that.” The bleach blond young woman shakes her head, her eyes wide.

“Didn’t need to.” The young patient smirks, seeing the small creature on the monitor, “Oh god...” Charlotte’s voice trails off as tears begin to burn her eyes, her jaw tightening as her chin trembles slightly. It was as if this child was created in the middle of a battlefield for her. All the times Anders had slugged her in the gut or pushed her into various pieces of furniture, even recently, it was a miracle this tiny human was determined to thrive. She hears the door to the secluded room open again while she maintains her focus on the monitor.

“I thought you were going to wait for me.” Serena scowls toward her old friend, but also doesn’t understand why Leah is here, “Ms. Faulkner, there are other patients for you to attend to.” She sighs as the F1 leaves, a slight appearance of relief shown in her expression. “I apologize for that. Doesn’t know boundaries.” Glancing down, she notices Charlotte’s trembling hand reaching up for her as the young woman is a bit overcome with it all. Serena takes her hand instinctively, realizing what was holding the young woman’s attention.

Fleur begins to chuckle, “Old Granny Wolfe.”

“Dare you to call her that.”

“Thirteen ways. Don’t risk it.” Charlotte releases a breath she wasn’t aware she was holding once the probe is withdrawn and her topsheet is adjusted to better cover her.
“I don’t know what that means.” Serena shakes her head, lifting the coffee cup to her lips, “You lot already have an inside joke?” She takes a sip.

“Something like that.” Fleur smirks, offering a printed sonogram to the young woman. “We’ll do another one in another ten weeks.” There was a change to the room, a change to her patient. One of bitter-sweetness. She’s read the file several times over.

Charlotte slowly releases her mother’s girlfriend’s hand, taking the small black and white photograph from the woman, and focusing exclusively on that. She doesn’t know what to say, if she should say anything. This is a new chapter for her. She needs to worry about someone other than herself now. This tiny human needs to be kept safe.

“I’ll take care of her twenty-week assessment myself. Just call to make sure it isn’t busy before you pop over. You have my word in regards to discretion. In the mean time, if you experience any vaginal bleeding whatsoever, you need to come back as soon as possible.” Fleur isn’t usually this mellow, oftentimes over the top, especially when Serena was concerned. She stands at the foot of the bed, retrieving the thick file from before from the basket, “Wolfe cub, I want you to remember something.” When her patient meets her eyes, she continues, “You are never alone and this woman can be your savior...and you’re also my favorite Wolfe.” She pats the young woman’s leg through the bed linens, pausing at Serena’s side to kiss her cheek. “I like this one.” Fleur leaves very quietly. She knows her audience when it’s given to her.

“Well...seems you’ve made quite the impact.” Serena raises an eyebrow, looking to the sonogram, “Looks like a bean when they’re that small.”

“Yeah.” Charlotte swallows her voice just above a whisper, “Serena?” She waits a moment, “If you’re still willing...I’d like to take you up on your previous offer to stay with you...”

“I have a large empty house. My nephew and his family will stay with us on occasion, but...otherwise it’s going to continue being empty. Quite honestly, I could use the company.” She lowers herself to the vinyl chair next to the bed after moving in front of it, “And you’re more than welcome to stay for as long as you’d wish...even if that’s well into that cub’s childhood.”

“Is that what it’s going to be known as?”

“Absolutely.” Serena winks toward her, glad she didn’t have to push at all as Ric had suggested. She isn’t surprised that all that was required was a small sonogram picture. Something that showed Charlotte that this was all real and that she wasn’t alone anymore. Anders Hero treating her horribly was one thing, but the possibility that he may do the same with their child was another entirely.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Leah accidentally causes more trouble by only trying to help, much to her consultants' ire.

Terrified, Charlotte vanishes when police arrive on AAU.

“I mean, it only makes sense really, I’ll use some of my insurmountable holiday time to tend to her.” Serena shakes her head, happy with the end result of the young woman staying with her. “It won’t be for very long. Only maybe a week or so. I assume you all will be able to carry on in my absence.”

Donna nods a little, “If there is anything you all need-”

“She isn’t going to like it, but I plan on taking her on a bit of a shopping spree. Poor girl has nothing.” She licks her lips, “Buying a new mobile with new digits, the whole nine yards. She deserves a bit of pampering.”

“She can wear a pair of scrubs on home in the meantime.” The nurse offers, glad to see her boss excited about something again. Xavier had confided in her just who the patient was since they were in constant close proximity to her. “Have you phoned Bernie about it at all? At least to tell her she’s going to be a Gran.”

“Not my place.” Serena shakes her head, “it isn’t my job to make her want to speak to people. A part of her is afraid to contact anyone though.” She folds her arms as she leans over the front of the nurses’ station desktop. “I can’t fathom what she could have possibly experienced at the hands of that man. Nor do I actually want to.” She tilts her head when the two professional looking individuals approach the nurses’ station as well, “Hello, is there anything I can help you with?”

“I’m Chief Inspector Knightly and this is Inspector Daly.” The olived skinned female pauses as she opens her notebook, clearing her throat to appear more serious. “We had report of a a domestic abuse victim in your unit going by the name of...” She flips a couple pages of the small notebook, “Charlotte Dunn.”

“This is all a misunderstanding. I never called for that.” She shakes her head.
“No, I did.” Leah says from behind the detectives, causing them to turn, “No one called when he was causing issue and you’re going to be in danger if he finds you once you leave here.” She folds her arms.

“This isn’t your call.” Serena gives her a look that could probably melt steel if given the opportunity.

“It shouldn’t be yours either.” The F1 shakes her head, motion to the police to follow her, “She’s just over here.”

“Please, wait-” The consultant follows after them.

“You want to protect her so much, this is protecting her.” Leah opens the door to the secluded room across from the consultants’ office.

Charlotte glances over toward the door as the two intimidating figures make their way through. She doesn’t look to their faces. Wanting to appear as small as possible in this instance. She doesn’t like this. Not one bit. She wants it to end as quickly as possible. She doesn’t say anything to them. Wanting to turn invisible in this instant.

Inspector Daly does the introductions this time. He stares toward the young woman, not knowing where car accident damage ended and domestic abuse wounds started. “Ms. Dunn, we need to take photographs of your injuries in order to build our case against your abuser. That’s the only way these types of things get sorted.” He’s met with silence from the young woman.

“Inspectors, if you wish to speak with me in my office, I believe we would accomplish much more than you will here.” Serena stands in the doorway, knowing fully that Charlotte wasn’t going to speak with them. Being bombarded with people demanding questions and photographs of her. “Inspectors.” She calls again, finally able to get them to leave the room.

Ric loops his stethoscope around his neck, having listened to everything as he opens the closed curtain. “Dr. Faulkner, a word.” He moves motions her to the secondary office, closing the door behind them, yet keeping the blinds open. “Do you understand what you’ve just done?”

Leah laughs a little, “What, angering Serena? I did something that should have been done days ago yet was neglected for reasons...I couldn’t possibly understand.”
“That’s Ms. Campbell to you.” He scowls, “The patient that you’ve decided to make a call to the police on, that you had no business making, was abused verbally, mentally, and physically...and those are just the ones we’ve seen while she’s been a patient here with us. She was kept in near isolation for over a year. Cut off from family and friends.” He shakes his head, “Serena has been the only person she’s gotten comfortable enough with to share small snippits of those facts.”

“Exactly. Do you really think Bernie Wolfe would be happy knowing that her girlfriend was neglecting to bring her daughter’s abuser to justice?”

“You’ve never met Bernie Wolfe,” Ric shakes his head, “You’d better pray you never meet her after the stunt you just pulled.” When it appears she doesn’t understand what the issue is, he continues, “You’ve betrayed all the work Serena has put into the mental side of this particular patient’s care, regardless of who she is to her. Not to mention you’ve also broken protocol and chain of command.”

Leah sighs, shaking her head a little, “Well, it’s getting settled now.”

“And I’m sending you home for the day, pending disciplinary action.”

“You can’t do that, come on, Mr. Griffin.” The platinum blonde shakes her head a little.

“Oh, I can, and I have.” Ric nods, “get your things. We’ll speak tomorrow.” He opens the door, returning to the rest of his unit. He sees that the police remain in the office, “Donna, can you please go and check on-”

“Already on it, I just needed to finish this last bit on this patient file.” Donna provides a few more keystrokes before clicking out of the application with the mouse. She rises from the desk, rushing toward the room in question, only to see an empty bed. Her heart skips a beat, fearing the worst, “Lou, call the other wards with a visual description of our secluded patient. We have a roamer.” She calls out toward the nurses’ desk before rushing toward the double doors.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Abigail calms a lost patient, realizing cleverness is a trait spread through the Wolfe line.

Serena delivers a gift to Charlotte.

Abigail Tate attempts to type up yet another proposal for extra funding for Darwin ward. They oftentimes need it most. “One of these days, they’re just going to tell me that we’ve bled them dry.” She mumbles to herself, using her laptop to also play calming music to help her focus. Seeing a figure move past her open door, she was also certain she had seen the gleam of an IV pole and the telltale white hospital gown of a patient. She furrows her brow, rising from her desk, and rushing to the hall. “Not going crazy just yet.” She mutters to herself. “Excuse me.” She calls out toward the patient, “Are you lost?”

Charlotte stands straighter, this is the most she’s walked since admittance days ago. She doesn’t know whether to turn around or stand still.

“My name is Abigail, what’s yours?” She takes a kind approach to this, it’s probably a patient who wasn’t all there mentally. Possibly a dementia or Alzheimer's patient that managed to find their way to her floor. She’s had it before. Not often, but a couple times.

The young blonde swallows, closing her eyes, “Charlotte.” She lets go of the pole she was holding onto, realizing her hand was trembling from the torrent of anxiety.

Abigail hums a soft approval, “It’s French, isn’t it? Means small, I think. Are you a Charlie or a Lottie?” Her tone remains calming, the music still coming from her laptop helping her mindset if only a bit.

“Char...” Charlotte continues to face the same way, away from this other woman. “It means petite or free man in French.”

“I was close enough.” She notices a relatively small spot of blood on the young woman’s shoulder, where her arm is also being held in place by a sling. She’s probably popped a suture, she thinks. “So, do you just want to go on a tour of the hospital or...were you looking for someone?”
“I don’t want to speak to the police.” Her chin dimples with emotion, “Everything will just go to shit.” The younger woman’s voice just above a whisper. More disappointed than anything. “He can’t find out.”

“Okay.” Abigail shrugs a little, having no idea what the young woman was talking about, “I don’t want to talk to police either. Who does?” She smirks to herself, “Would you like some tea? I have one of those machines that takes the pods and you can have whatever blend you can imagine...as long as I have the cup for it. I’ve coffee that way as well.” She moves a little closer, “Do you need some help?”

Charlotte finally meets the eyes of the woman she was speaking with, “I could go for a proper cuppa. Earl grey, if you have it.”

“Ah. That’s a good one and I certainly do. One of my favorites.” The CEO nods, leading the young woman to her office, “You wouldn’t happen to be Serena’s Charlotte, would you?”

“I suppose I am now.” She groans, needing to take a moment. Everything hurts. She couldn’t pinpoint just one thing. Rushing from the department the way that she did wasn’t her best idea ever. It's just something she felt like she needed to do at the time. “She’s,” the young woman pauses, feeling another wave of pain, “She’s been good to me the past few days.”

Abigail smiles genuinely, “Let me help you sit.” She gives her a pillow to hold at her side before lowering the young woman slowly to the sofa within her office. “Serena and I have been friends for many years. She’s an incredibly good person, even if she would much rather scare our student doctors.”

“I’m going to move in with her...once I’m finished here.” Charlotte closes her eyes again, attempting to center herself so she wouldn’t focus solely on the pain radiating from both her shoulder and abdomen. “I think we could make the experience into a reality show...like Big Brother minus all the evictions.”

She can tell the young woman’s face grimaces, “Do they have you on any pain management? I imagine you’re probably due for some.”

“I’m pregnant, so I’m not able to have hardly anything.” She swallows, that was the first time she’s actually vocalized that she was expecting, “I think it’s just Paracetamol. Just...run of the mill stuff. Nothing that would dare actually work.”
“Oh, I had no idea. Congratulations.” Abigail can’t help except smile a bit, “In that case, though, you’re absolutely correct. I’m sorry. Maybe tea will help? My gran used to think tea could cure everything. Cold, flu, depression, war...everything.”

“Well, she wasn’t too far off. Dehydration is the main issue when it comes to the flu. So, if you’re busy drinking tea all during it, you’re keeping hydrated.” Charlotte smirks a little to herself, “Depending on what blend of leaves you may have, they might include vitamin C and zinc. Treating the common cold.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way.”

“And with depression...it’s impossible to feel down when you have a good cuppa.” She listens to the gentle music continue to play from the woman’s laptop, “Case and point, your grandmother was a genius.”

Abigail begins to chuckle to herself, making her way over to the single serve brewer. “You’re very clever.” She quickly jots a text message to Serena, just letting her know that Charlotte was there with her and to give her a bit of time before coming to retrieve her. “You know, I work with your brother all the time. He’s incredibly bright as well.”

“When he wants to be.” Charlotte looks over toward the other woman after a moment, “I miss him greatly.”

“You know, I could give a ring to-”

“No. He can’t know I’m here yet. The bruises need to heal a bit first and I don’t foresee all of that happening until after I’ve gone to stay with Serena.” She’s adamant about this, “I will not put his safety in jeopardy for my own heart. I know how he is. Thinks he can save the world. He was always like Mum that way.”

“So, you’re only relying on Serena for support currently?” Abigail raises an eyebrow, “No wonder she requested to use her holiday time effective tomorrow.” She pauses, “Probably plans to break you free tonight.”

“I’ve been here for four days now.” Charlotte smiles gently when the woman starts to bring the mug of tea over to her, “I’d say it’s about time I get out of here. Stop using up all these NHS resources.”
“Are you in the healthcare field as well?”

That was the conversation that incurred the accident. She swallows, as it flashes in her head. Her panicked pleading, screaming, her attempts to open the car door. His indifferent staring through the front windshield. “No, no. I’m just an undergraduate. Cam is the golden boy to take after our parents.”

Abigail nods slowly, “If you went back to school, what do you think you would you like to study?”

“I don’t think about it.” Charlotte replies quietly.

Serena eavesdrops on their conversation, pausing just outside the door. Maybe Ric was correct. Maybe she was taking on too much alone. Especially since she really hardly knows this young woman, or her ways, truly. She begins inhaling slowly, exhaling just the same before knocking at the doorway. “Mind if I join you?” She edges a wheelchair within the room to make things a bit easier for when they decide to return to AAU.

Having taken a seat in a cloth high back accent chair next to the sofa, Abigail leans forward a bit, “Of course. Would you like a cup of tea as well? I’ve an assortment.” She motions with a nod of her head toward the corner of her office. “Coffee as well.”

“You’ve found me.” The young woman watches as her mother’s partner enters the space, a smirk playing at the corner of her lips.

“And I come bearing gifts.” Serena takes hold of the clipboard from under her arm, lifting it up with her other hand, “Release papers.”

“She may have a few sutures that need adjustment, but I will sign for you if you’d like for me to.” Abigail smirks a little, glancing over to see the grin that begins to pain the young woman’s face. “See, Charlotte, it’s almost all over.”

“No,” Charlotte’s eyes glisten with relieved, unshed tears. “It’s only just beginning.” She clears her throat, stopping once pain comes from her side. She looks over toward Serena, “Are you still sure about this? I would understand if you were to change your mind.”

Serena nears the young woman, crouching in front of her as she places the clipboard on the young
woman’s lap, “I’ve never been more certain of anything.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Charlotte has a hard time not being independent.

Serena does her best to make Charlotte comfortable in her home as they settle into living with one another.

Chapter Notes

You may notice time beginning to pass throughout the story. Someone will almost always mention it in the beginning. Hopefully it isn't too confusing.

Charlotte places her arm immobilizer on the breakfast table, located in the kitchen area of this large house. She lowers her arm into the sling, taking her time and being cautious. She happens to groan, no amount of Paracetamol was going to help her.

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Serena sighs, moving down the rest of the stairs quickly, knowing exactly where the young woman would be and what she would be doing, “You’ve only been here a few days and this is the fourth time I’ve caught you doing this. I told you to just ask when you need help, Charlotte. No need to power on through it.” She helps the young woman with the strap of the arm sling, knowing she’s probably in an incredible amount of pain.

“I...” The younger blonde stops moving, closing her eyes for a moment as the other woman finishes clasping her shoulder strap. “I’ve reset my shoulders on my own a few times. I used to use a bed sheet and fashion myself a sling, wear it when Anders was at work. Can’t I do that instead of this thing?”

“No.” The older woman shakes her head, adjusting the young woman’s shirt around her sling for her to be more comfortable as a whole. “I understand the issue though. When you’re used to doing things on your own for so long, it’s hard to change.” Serena stops, placing her arms at her sides and looking her partner’s daughter in the eye, “There we go, all finished.”

“I’m going to need to do it on my own at some point.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, motioning to the table, “This table is the tallest flat surface in the house next to the counter. I reckoned it would be easier that way.”
“You aren’t too far off, but you still need to be cautious.” Serena gently pokes a playful finger to the tip of the young woman’s nose before moving to the refrigerator, “Now, we’ve been getting take-away for days now, so I should probably pop off to the shop to obtain us some actual food.”

“I can cook.” She shrugs her better shoulder, receiving a look from the other woman, “I actually don’t mind it. I found it calming since it was one of the only things I was permitted to do to pass the time.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that—”

“You aren’t asking. I insist.” Charlotte nods, “I may just ask you to lift a pan or slice some produce.” Motiong to the shoulder with the sling holding it in place, “I’ve seen your slicing skills, they aren’t bad.”

Serena gives a throaty chuckle, “Okay.” She closes the refrigerator, picking up the magnetic notepad from the door of the appliance, and pen attached to it. She sets it on the table in front of the young woman, “What do you need?”

“Well, that all depends on what you already have. It’s like a challenge.” The young woman watches her elder, furrowing brow when the woman shakes her head negatively, “You have to have something. What do you eat in the morning before work?”

Walking closer to the spitting image of her girlfriend, she raises an eyebrow, “I’m a surgeon. I’m never here long enough to care.” It was nice to see Charlotte laugh after that, even if it was paired with a groan at the end of it, “Breakfast is oftentimes just a pastry from Pulse’s unless I’m only feeling a liquid breakfast.”

“Couldn’t be a smoothie, no. Must be coffee and disappointment.”

“A joke for everything. It’s almost as if Bernie’s here.” Serena chuckles a little harder, shaking her head. “Speaking of which, we’re supposed to video chat tonight if you wanted to join in. I’m sure she would love to hear from you.” Receiving a you-know-why-I-don’t-want-that look from the young woman next to her, she sighs, “Fine, fine. Radio silence in regards to you, it is.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte nods, “I’m going to write seasonings on this list. You need seasonings.” She pauses, “Also possibly fudge ripple ice cream...and apples. Just...fresh fruit as a whole.” She continues to write things down, glad it wasn’t her dominant side that was injured. “Do you like fresh
“Charlotte, write whatever it is you would like for me to buy, just write it down. If you want ten different ice creams, just write them down. I honestly don’t care. You can have whatever you want.” She shakes her head, looking down to her cheetah print silk pajamas covering her frame, “I’ve never met anyone who would wake before me.” Serena folds her arms over her chest, “I’m also not accustomed to staying home while on holiday.”

“Oh.” The young woman pauses, looking up at her again, “I’m sorry.”

“No, no. Please, don’t be. I’d rather be here with you than alone in France anyway.” Serena gives her a wink with a genuine smile, “I’m going to go and get changed. Did you want to go shopping with me? Maybe just to get out of the house.”

“No, um…” Charlotte shakes her head, “No, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather stay home.” She focuses on the paper before her again, scribbling down suggestions in cursive handwriting, “I don’t need the looks of pity…or soft chatter of people curious as to what happened as all I’m doing is looking at raw chicken breast. No, I’d rather stay here.”

“Okay.” Serena gently touches the young woman affectionately on the middle of her back, between her shoulders, “If you change your mind, let me know. It would only be for a few hours.” She retreats from the room, making her way back to the stairs. She can’t help but worry that the young woman would fear being alone after everything that happened only a week prior. However, Serena feels it isn’t her place to force the young woman into anything. She couldn’t possibly do that to her.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Alone, Charlotte finds the need to defend herself when an unknown intruder enters Serena’s home.

A reunion occurs, helping Charlotte realize it's exactly what she needs.

Charlotte stands in the kitchen area once more. Hungry for a change, having felt nauseous most of the day. She was able to find a jar of peanut butter and a jar of jam in the cabinets as she went through them, clearing out any expired spices or cans of soup. This is exactly what she needed. She didn’t, however, take into consideration just how frustrating this would be without the use of one of her arms. Hearing the front door open, she glances to the wall clock. Serena was only gone for just over an hour. There were many things on that list that she supplied her. There was no possible way she could be back just yet.

Cautiously, she grabs the largest knife from the wooden block in front of her before backing herself into a corner, away from the eyeline of the person cautiously stepping down the hall. She closes her eyes, taking note of the footsteps. Serena was wearing a pair of her casual flat slip-ons. Rubber bottomed with a thick sole. They didn’t make this sound. This sounds more like boots against the hardwood floor, with a subtle heel to them. Expensive boots.

Charlotte furrows her brow, waiting for the sound of the steps to leave the room before she makes her way to the doorway, instantly dropping the knife to the floor. Her eyes flood with tears, smiling with relief as the person in question turns quickly, still standing in the hall, “Mum.”

“Charlotte.” That was the very last thing Bernie Wolfe was expecting upon her arrival home, the daughter that wouldn’t even speak to her. She moves closer to the young woman, taking note of her appearance, “My god, Char, what happened?”

The young woman leans her head into her mother’s chest, letting her emotions give way. She doesn’t speak, she can’t find the words. Just over the moon that the woman was here again. Her heart having just gone through extremes of possibly being kidnapped from this house, to solstice in her mother’s presence. She hasn’t cried this hard in so long, not in front of anyone. This is exactly who she needs now.

“Okay.” Bernie cautiously reaches her hand up to gently stroke her daughter’s hair, expecting her to pull away, but surprised when she doesn’t. She wraps her other arm around the young woman’s waist. Bernie doesn’t know how she could possibly grasp her daughter without causing pain, simply
wanting to hold her as closely as possible.

Charlotte finally finds herself stopping after a couple of moments, sniffing a little as she calms herself down. She lifts her head, looking into the eyes she shares, “It’s really good to see you.” Her voice at a whisper, worried her emotions may give way once more.

“Ditto.” She nods, leaning forward to gently press a kiss to her daughter’s forehead, “I do wish you looked a bit...healthier though.”

“Can’t always get what you want.” The younger woman huffs a soft chortle before groaning, “I was making myself a sandwich. Serena just left not long ago to pop over to the grocer. Come in, sit down. I can make you a sandwich too, if you’d like. Only peanut butter and jam in the house at the moment though.”

Bernie laughs a little to herself, relieved by her daughter’s welcoming nature, “Charlotte, how did you even get here?”

“Car accident.” Charlotte holds her mother’s hand as she gently guides her toward the kitchen area. “Serena tended to me.” She motions for her mother to sit, glad when she obliges.

The yellowing bruise on her daughter’s neck still prevalent, this wasn’t all from a car accident and it infuriates her, though her happiness of seeing her daughter after so long far outweighs her anger at the moment. “She never told me...I’d have been here sooner.” The woman licks her lips, shaking her head.

“I asked her not to.” She slides the sandwich she completed for herself over toward her mother. Relieved she hadn’t tried to close the jars, she begins to make a second sandwich, curious as to why Serena kept sliced bread and these two jars, but nothing else. “What could you have possibly done that the Holby City AAU was unable to do?”

Bernie quickly wipes a tear as it trickles down her own cheek, unaware that it was there in the first place. Glad her daughter couldn’t see, “I would have stayed with you, Char. I could have supported you.”

“Serena did.” Charlotte nods, “It’s okay. I’m on the mend. I can only look up from here, right? Positivity and all that.” She smirks to herself, wondering why she doesn’t take her own advice. Charlotte pauses, “Speaking of positivity.” She removes the sonogram that Serena hung
affectionately on the freezer door when they arrived home, handing it to her mother.

Bernie is still absolutely thrown by her daughter being here instead of her partner after phoning Holby to ask Ric what her schedule was. She knew the woman would be available tonight, but after being told she was on holiday, she wasn’t sure exactly where she would be physically. Charlotte has made this a different type of trip. She shakes her head a little, bringing herself back to the present moment as she looks at the small photograph her daughter had given her. She feels her heart skip a beat as she stands suddenly, “You’re pregnant?”

“Surprise.” Charlotte announces weakly, a sarcastic tone to her voice. A smile beginning to form on her face.

“I’m...I’m going to be a Gran?”

“Or a Nan, Nana, Baba, Gigi, or Auntie Bernie...whatever it is you’d like for your grandchild to call you.” The young woman tucks her wavy, dark blonde hair behind her ear.

Bernie places her hands on either side of the young woman’s face fondly, grinning, “Thank you for letting me play a part, Charlotte.” She kisses her daughter’s forehead again, near the hairline, “I’m...incredibly confused, but also very happy right now.”

“Good.” Charlotte stays like that for a moment before being released to return to her sandwich.

“I’m sure your father and brother were thrilled.” She chuckles to herself a little, “I’d bet Cameron has already made a Best Uncle shirt for himself.”

“They...” She pauses, groaning a little when she attempts to close the jars, finally giving up after a few moments and multiple tries. Opening them was easier, she thinks. Charlotte moves to sit at the breakfast table, opposite her mother, “They don’t know yet. You’re the first...other than Serena...and Holby City Hospital staff.”

“What?” Bernie’s smile fades a little, “Charlotte, what the hell is going on?” Her tone sincere, “and where is the child’s father-”

“He doesn’t know either and I’d prefer for it to stay that way.” Charlotte nods, finally taking a bite of the simple sandwich that had taken her far too long to make. She wonders how one-armed people are
able to operate jars. Maybe they have small machines. She thinks of anything just to take up the
silence in her head.

It dawns on Bernie as she sits up a bit straighter, “Anders Hero.” She says quietly, not expecting a
response from her daughter, and not receiving one. “The only one that makes sense. Your father
would tell him where you were and Cam...oh, Cam would fight...or try to.”

The young woman lifts her head slowly, meeting her mother’s eyes again, surprised the woman
understood immediately, “So, Serena, who is currently seeking out thirteen different variations of ice
creams for me, has taken care of things. She’s welcomed me into her home, no questions asked, and
told me to stay for as long as I wish. Even making plans to continue housing this eleven-week-old
fetus when they’re five-years-old...and how she could decorate their bedroom.” Charlotte smiles a
little, “It’s sweet...and she seems excited. I don’t know if it matches your excitement, but they may be
on par at least.”

“She deserves it.” The older blonde nods, “every bit of it.”

Charlotte realizes she can ask her mother a question that had been burning in the back of her mind to
ask of Serena, but didn’t want to upset her in case the answer wasn’t positive, “Can I ask you
something?” Noticing the subtle nod from the other woman, she continues, “I’ve seen photographs
around here of a young woman. I’ve already met Jason and his girlfriend...their daughter, but this is
someone else. Looks just like Serena, but she hasn’t mentioned a daughter even once to me. At least,
not that I can recall.”

Bernie folds her arms, leaning back in her chair a little, “That would be Serena’s daughter Elinor.”
She pauses, “She died over a year ago.” Her tone soft, remembering the day clearly. She never
lamented over patients, but Elinor Campbell was the exception. Just as they were making progress
together, Serena’s only daughter loses her life. It wasn’t fair to anyone involved. “I tried to save her,
but...I wasn’t able to.”

The young woman nods again, “Probably why she insists on taking care of me.”

“Or because you’re you and I’m me. You’re virtually her step-daughter. Cam always says he gives
her a hard time about it when he can. I find it hilarious.” Bernie grins broadly, releasing her arms
from the fold across her chest. She picks up the sandwich on the dish, actually hungry after a ten
hour flight, and takes a bite. “Exquisite, Ms. Dunn.”

“Glad you think so.” Charlotte nods, nearly finished her own, “Now, would you mind closing those
glass jars for me?”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Serena gets a surprise when she returns home from the grocery.

Bernie reevaluates everything when she realizes exactly how much she's been missing.

“So, what all is injured on you, exactly?” Bernie furrows her brow, lounging with her daughter on the sofa, having insured that the young woman was surrounded by pillows just to make her more comfortable with her injuries.

“Three broken ribs and a broken clavicle. Put me under to fix a dislocated shoulder and just repaired the clavicle surgically at the same time. It would have hurt too much under just the influence of Paracetamol.” Charlotte sucks the air between her cheek, “I did get to meet your friend Fleur Fanshawe though. Dr. Duval and Serena were concerned about internal damage to the placenta or whatever, called her down for a consult.”

“Ah, Fleur Fanshawe.”

The young woman begins to grin, keeping herself from laughing because she knows it’s only going to cause her pain, “Why would you threaten her with thirteen ways to kill her?”

“You didn’t see her when I was here last!” Bernie answers incredulously, “She was about ready to snog Serena at the moment I wasn’t looking and openly flirted with her while we were in the same room. I’m pretty sure she may have groped her once or twice.”

“I stand corrected, Fleur didn’t tell me all of that.” Charlotte raises and eyebrow, “She probably waited for when you left instead.”

The young woman’s mother rolls her eyes, amused with her daughter. “Do you want me to go get you an ice pack?”

“I’d rather you just stay here.” The subtle noise of the television fills the silences. Charlotte would never admit it, but having her mother there was exactly what she needed now even though she knows the woman didn’t come with the intention of seeing her. “How long are you staying for?” She
swallows, almost afraid of what the answer will be.

Bernie knew the question would come, she knew she would need to disappoint. She exhales, lifting her hand to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. She would always curl the wavy tendrils, but they’d never stay that way for long. Especially after such a long flight. “I was going to stay a week, but...” She shakes her head a little, “I didn’t realize exactly how much I’ve been missing...how much I could have prevented-”

“Mum, you couldn’t have known.” Charlotte shakes her head slowly, glancing over toward her mother, “I ran off with a man much older than me. You didn’t like it, I remember, but I wasn’t about to listen to you at the time. I was a bitch to you then, Cam and I both were.” She answers quietly, “I was all about what Dad wanted instead of thinking about what I wanted...also Anders is well fit and good in bed.” She knows the idea of the man bothers her mother, “I haven’t spoken to Dad or Cam in over a year. Cam is always...everywhere and Dad just...listens to whatever Anders tells him, I guess. He’s never tried to phone me or anything like that.”

“I’m trying very hard not to use one of those thirteen ways.”

“I know, and I appreciate your restraint.” The young woman attempts to adjust her position, groaning loudly and pausing just in the middle of it. When her mother jumps in, ready to help her, she shakes her head. “It’s fine, I’m fine.”

“You don’t need to speak about him if it pains you, you know.” Bernie moves closer to her daughter, gently taking hold of her hand as it rests on a stack of pillows, “you don’t need to just to appease me.”

“I think I need to just in order to...be able to.” Charlotte offers her mother a closed mouth smile, “Thank you, though.” She freezes when she hears the front door open again, knowing her mother was about to surprise her partner. It’s something Bernie would do when she and Cam were younger as well. She loved surprising them.

“Charlotte, I was only able to find five of the thirteen ice creams on that list.” Serena carries in a couple large brown paper grocery bags straight toward the kitchen.

”I made them up.” Charlotte mouths toward her mother, smirking a bit. “I’ll come and organize things as you bring them in.” She lets her mother help her stand as she calls out to Serena, knowing the woman carrying the groceries in the first place wouldn’t be able to see her just yet.
“You don’t need to do that.” Serena quickly moves back to her car outside, trying to remember the last time she had bought so many groceries. She thinks it was when Elinor was small. She was never much of a cook, but she would make a homemade meal every Sunday for the girl if she was home. Lifting another two bags, fitting a third between them, she closes the boot of the car, amazed even those were able to fit within the small space. Maybe she should have taken Bernie’s car instead, glad she was able to talk the woman into keeping it before she moved to stay in Nairobi. She sits in there sometimes, as it reminds her of the woman so much. It still smelled of her. She sighs a little, carrying them back inside, “This wasn’t nearly as expensive as I thought it was going to be. I still feel it’s too much.” She sets the bags onto the table.

“I’ll be able to pack things up for you to take to work. Baked chicken, roast pork, or the occasional steak will last us more days than take-away does.” The young woman offers, “No more take-away when you get home from work. Think about it.”

“I think it sounds like a great idea, Char. I’m glad one of us can cook.” Bernie answers from the doorway, having snuck in behind Serena while she was setting down the paper bags.

Serena stands straighter, eyes widening. She turns slowly to face that voice, a part of her feeling like it was just in the back of her head. She begins to grin broadly once she catches sight of her girlfriend and she rushes toward her. Kissing her deeply when she gets there. “You’re here.” She whispers after breaking away.

“In the flesh.” She nods, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend, “We can probably cancel that video conference for tonight. I reckon I’ll be a bit jet lagged.”

“Oh, stop it.” Serena pecks her lips again, running a hand through her partner’s hair, “Were you surprised to see Charlotte here?”

Bernie nods, “I’m more surprised you listened to her and didn’t phone me.”

“Hey!” Charlotte interjects, slowly putting away all five pints of the various ice cream flavors. Every time she would obtain another pint, the freezer door would close, and there wasn’t much she could do about it. It was all a bit comical to watch.

Serena hums, “I thought about it, but...we played by her rules.” Another peck against the woman’s lips before wrapping both arms around her, “I really can’t believe you’re here.”
“After ten hours on a plane, neither can I.” Bernie holds her closely, “I don’t know how you do it as much as you do.”

“Neither do I.” She nods a little, realizing she left her partner’s one armed daughter to put away all of the groceries. “Hold that thought.” Serena turns away from her partner, seeing a couple bags still full on the table. “I see you’ve found the peanut butter and jam.” Serena motions to the jars on the countertop.

“I’m surprised you manage to keep fresh sliced bread...when you can’t even keep apples.” Charlotte mumbles.

“And the cravings begin.” Bernie watches them as she really has no idea where anything could possibly go and she knows she would only get in the way if she tried to help. She reaches into her pocket, lifting out the sonogram of her first grandchild, returning it to its place behind a couple pastel colored magnets, next to the magnetic notepad. Things are changing yet again.
After a night of passion, Bernie questions Serena about Leah.

Charlotte reveals something to her mother when a side effect of her pregnancy rears its ugly head.

Serena tries to quell a heated situation.

Bernie holds onto her girlfriend as they rest in bed. Covers pulled up casually with naked bodies underneath. The air wafts a post coital perfume. She absently strokes Serena’s blonde tipped hair, “I really like this change you’ve made.”

“Thank you.” Serena keeps her arms wrapped around Bernie’s torso, her head resting just above her partner’s breast, “You know, no one else seemed to notice.” She says quietly, “Just you and Fleur.” She smirks a little when Bernie gives her a look, “Charlotte said that would get a rise out of you, even though you really haven’t anything to worry about.” She absently strokes the bottom of the woman’s rib cage with her thumb, “There’s never been any competition.”

“Not even with that new F1?” She raises an eyebrow, giving her usual guffaw when she receives a surprised look from her girlfriend. “I have eyes everywhere, Campbell. You know this.”

“Too young, too eager.” She shakes her head a little, “I enjoy the attention and knowing that I can attract a lost soul twenty years my junior, but that’s as far as it goes.” Serena shakes her head negatively.

“Why wouldn’t you attract a thirty-something, you’re breathtaking.” Bernie smirks, knowing her partner was blushing. They sit in comfortable silence for a few moments before she decides to break it, “What do you think the chances are that Charlotte would notice one of those ice creams going missing?”

“Well, there’s only five of them, darling, and she’s rather observant. I’d say pretty high.” Serena finally adjusts her posture, moving to lean against the headboard.

“You know she made up most of those ice cream names, right?”
The other woman begins to slowly shake her head, “Of course she did. She’s just like you. Why wouldn’t she do something like that?” Serena shakes her head, “I searched high and low in the freezer section of that grocer. I even asked various staff members if they carried Cherry Marshmallow Fudge Ripple ice cream or Pineapple Peach Delight ice cream. I must have looked like a total loon.”

“A beautiful loon.” Bernie leans over to kiss her tenderly before climbing from the mattress. She grabs the woman’s cheetah print, silk dressing gown from the back of the bedroom door, wrapping it around herself. “What flavor do you want?”

Serena pauses, thinking of the flavors she purchased, “Home Sweet Honeycomb.” She hums a chuckle, “Ben & Jerry’s have ridiculous names.”

“I’ll be back shortly.” She opens the door, closing it behind herself. Bernie can’t help but smile, everything was going to be different now. If this is how Serena acts when she comes home for what she believes is a week, how will she feel when it is long term. Standing at the top of the stairs, she hears something coming from the floor below. She descends the stairs slowly, taking a look into the lounge. Television on at an incredibly low volume, apple slices having fallen from the plate that she can only assume was resting on the cushion next to her daughter. The girl got up in a hurry.

Charlotte leans over the toilet, retching every scrap of food consumed throughout the day. The pizza they ordered for dinner so her time wouldn’t be spent making something instead of just spending time together, the peanut butter and jam sandwich from lunch, the two apples she’s had as snacks. All of it. Every heave causes agony and wants her to scream out, but she reserves herself. She knows how to keep quiet despite intense pain.

“Charlotte, I’m coming in.” Bernie says quietly, glad the door was unlocked. She quickly kneels on the floor next to her daughter, holding back her hair. Just being present with her, “You really need to tell us when you need help, Char.” Her voice gentle, worried.

“You were busy having wild tantric sex, I didn’t want to bother.” Her voice rough, uneven. She tries to take a moment to just breathe, try to breathe really, “Also I wasn’t about to run upstairs to alert you.”

She rolls her eyes at her daughter, taking the white hair tie from around her wrist to pull back the young woman’s long hair into a messy bun. “What about phoning?”
“I don’t have one.” Charlotte slowly leans herself back, pushing herself against the tiled wall. The space around her yellowing bruised eyes, damp. She keeps focusing on just breathing, “This isn’t new. I can handle this.” When her mother seems confused, she continues, “I didn’t break my ribs in the accident...and I’ve had this...vomity-thing for a couple of weeks now.”

“Commoners call it morning sickness.” Bernie reaches over toward her daughter to place her hand on the young woman’s cheek, only for her to turn away. She pulls back, casually curling her legs under herself. “How long ago were your ribs broken, Char?”

“Month, maybe.” She bites the inside of her cheek, “I um...” The young woman lifts her head, “The washer had broken and I thought I’d fix it myself. I knew it had something to do with the rincing mechanism. However, I’m not someone who routinely repairs appliances, so I went to our computer to search for proper instructions.”

Bernie hates this, hates knowing what’s coming for her daughter and knowing there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“I...I wasn’t allowed on the computer. Anders had told me...” Charlotte closes her eyes, focusing on her breathing and trying not to focus on her pain, “never to go on the computer. I think he was afraid I would try to contact someone. I thought if I was quick enough and used a browsing window that wouldn’t track my history, that I’d be okay.” She adjusts her legs in front of her, moaning a little with each movement, “I didn’t know he set the machine to notify him when it was activated.”

“Oh, Charlotte.” Bernie whispers, knowing this is taking much for the young woman to tell her.

“Yeah.” The young woman knew she didn’t need to continue. “So...safe to say, he wasn’t happy and...I learned my lesson.” The room falls silent and she tears up. When she notices her mother offering her hand to hold, she takes it gingerly.

Serena carefully descends the stairs, having put on her pyjamas, “Berenice.” She hushly calls out, having waited near ten minutes and not really understanding what could be keeping her. “You’re only coming for ice cream.” Reaching the landing, she notices the kitchen light off. Serena turns, moving to the lounge and taking note of the spilled apples. She straightens them up, moving the plate to the coffee table in front of the sofa. “Berenice.” She says again, a little louder this time. All of this beginning to worry her.

Bernie smirks, knowing she would come looking for her. “In here.” She waves her eyebrows toward her daughter, “I stole her dressing gown.”
“Looks comfortable.” Charlotte smiles a little, finally lifting her head when she sees the other woman at the door. “Welcome to the party.”

Serena places her hand to her chest, sighing with relief. “Are you okay?”

“We’re going to buy her a new mobile tomorrow.” Bernie nods, “She needs to be able to contact us...and her brother...and her father, when she’s ready.” She sits up a bit, “Also, Campbell, she’s going to need some-”

“She’s already done too much for me.” Charlotte interrupts, shaking her head, “I don’t need-”

“Stop it.” Serena steps into the bathroom more, sitting along the edge of the porcelain bathtub. The smell of vomit having hit her nose before even stepping through the doorway prior. “Charlotte, we will get you whatever you need. You need both a form of communication, which I meant to pick up, but it slipped my mind, and...has your morning sickness been constant?”

Noticing her daughter shake her head negatively, Bernie watches her daughter closely as she speaks to her partner, “NVP, but I believe it’s exacerbated her fractured ribs. They should be nearly healed by now.” Slowly, her gaze drifts to her girlfriend, making eye contact. They share a knowledge that didn’t need to be said, Serena usually just understands. “They aren’t going to get better if you’re vomiting regularly.”

“I will consult with Fleur and have a script written up.”

“Well, it’s settled then. I’m thrilled I wasn’t included in the conversation whatsoever even though it was about me entirely.” Charlotte exhales slowly, “and I was sitting right here the entire time during it.” She tries to push up off the floor, releasing her mother’s hand to use it and the wall as leverage. Her face grimaces tightly and she groans out, closing her eyes after in an attempt to calm herself and steady her breathing. “A week ago, I had a home...and a life...and a man that was ready to marry me and wanted to marry me and have a family with me.” She stops, glad they weren’t about to interrupt or ruin the overall silence of the room. “All I had to do was listen and I couldn’t even do that.”

“Because that isn’t how things work in a healthy relationship, Charlotte.” Bernie stands, attempting to reason with her.

“That’s rich, coming from you.” The young woman mumbles, shaking her head a little.
“Then take it from me.” Serena stands and reaches out to touch the young woman’s forearm that rests within the confines of her sling. “There are no perfect relationships. However, a healthy relationship means your partner never hurting you...not emotionally or mentally, and especially not physically.” She swallows, hoping she’s resonating with the young woman even a little bit. She watches as Bernie leaves the room before continuing, “I love your Mum more than anything. She’s saved me from myself on many occasions...and twenty hours round trip is nothing if it means I can be with her.” Serena pauses, “I thought once that your Mum would be better off without me and...I nearly made the biggest mistake of my life, but I asked her to wait for me instead.” Serena motions toward the doorway, signifying that Bernie was here now, “Having all of those things that you mentioned, do not make a lick of difference if you aren’t happy.”

Charlotte closes her eyes, tilting her head back, “I owe her an apology.” Her voice soft, sincere.

“You’ve been through a whole hell of a lot.” Serena pauses, “Train yourself to take a hand when it’s offered to you for help...try not to bite it.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Bernie and Charlotte spend some much needed time together as Bernie takes her to physiotherapy appointments.

Charlotte decides to finally see her brother, but will he be as receptive to her news as she hopes?

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween, my little goblins!

My favorite holiday of the year, actually.

I do hope I captured Jac and Fletch well enough. It's made me slightly nervous.

“Mum, they attached electrodes to my shoulder and zapped me with them.” Charlotte explains as they walk toward the elevator from her physiotherapy session, “And my pain like...decreased by a solid thirty percent instantly. I can’t explain it...I’m absolutely thrown for a loop.”

“They’re called TENs units. Used one for my neck after the IED. We’ll get you one for home.” Bernie grins a bit, happy to see her daughter so excited for something. She had been home for nearly a week now and even in that short amount of time, their relationship was starting to get back to what it used to be before everything happened with Marcus. “The one here is professional grade, able to go to higher levels. Home units aren’t able to go so high...for obvious reasons.”

“Thank you.” She absently takes hold of her mother’s arm as they stand there, watching the numbers change floors above the elevator once they reach it. “If you want to head down to see Serena...I,” She pauses, this was taking a lot for her, “I think I’m going to go to Darwin to see Cam.”

Her mother glances over toward her, “I think that would be a great idea.” Honestly, Bernie is surprised her daughter has been able to wait this long to see him. Throughout their childhoods, the parts that she was present for, Cameron and Charlotte were always likely to playfully spar with one another. Though no matter what, her children always knew they could rely on one another. Knowing Charlotte had been secluded for as long as she had, she questioned what was running through her son’s head. Especially knowing that Cameron didn’t like the man Charlotte was with either. “I’ll come up to you when I’m finished saying hello to Serena.”
“When you finish snogging Serena, got it.” Charlotte smirks, watching as her mother presses the buttons for their associated wards once they enter the elevator car, “Do you...think he’ll even want to see me?” She was glad they shared this elevator alone so no one could hear her stupid, insecure questions.

“Well, I know I wanted to see you.” Bernie answers honestly, offering a kind closed mouth smile, “I can only imagine your favorite brother would want to as well.” They stand in comfortable silence for a few more seconds before the woman leans over, gently pressing a kiss to her daughter’s temple, “You’ll be fine.”

The young woman doesn’t respond to her, nodding a little as she steps off the elevator car. Racked with nervousness about being in an area with so many people she just didn’t know, not to mention plenty of areas for people to hide. She shakes her head a little bit, clearing the thoughts as she takes in the space. Walking down a hall, Charlotte finally notices the nurses’ station. This is a relatively quiet unit, she thinks, padding her way to the oval desk. “Excuse me.”

Jac Naylor doesn’t lift her head, bent over at the hip as she reads something on the computer monitor in front of her, thick-rimmed glasses pushed onto her face, “How can I help you?” Her tone uninterested, brusk. When the person in front of her doesn’t answer, she finally lifts her head, “Yeah, what can I do for you?”

“Um.” Charlotte looks away quickly once attention is placed on her, freezing up.

“I don’t have time for this.” She mumbles, sighing, “Are you looking for someone?” The redhead’s voice pattern is slow, growing impatient with each word. “Fletch.”

Adrian Fletcher shakes his head toward the surgeon, having been nearing the desk from an opposite hall, focusing on the young woman standing there. He takes notice of her arm, “I’m Adrian Fletcher, head of nursing. Are you lost?” The yellowing bruising of her neck and face, her hurt arm. He immediately expects the worst, he’s seen it many times before, “What floor are you looking for, love?”

“No, um.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, lifting her head to meet the nursing director’s eyes. “I’m looking for my brother.”

“Oh,” He smiles a little toward her, “What’s his name? I’ll see if he’s on this floor or if you pressed a wrong button. Easy fix. I’ll even walk you there myself.”
“Charlotte.” Cameron Dunn steps out from the treatment area just off of the nurses’ desk, slowly looping his stethoscope around his neck. He laughs a little to himself, as he folds his arms across his chest. She doesn’t look well, he realizes. He doesn’t know what to say really.

“Dr. Dunn, how do you know this young woman?” Jac stands up straighter, placing her hands at her hips.

The young man nods, “This is my sister.”

“Oh.” The woman nods, her tone turning to that of surprise, “Didn’t know you had one.”

“What? She looks just like Bernie.” Fletch furrows his brow, teasing his friend. He offers his hand to the new young woman, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Charlotte.” He smirks a bit when she obliges his offered hand. “Welcome to Darwin. Back in town and came see your big brother first?”

“No.” Charlotte shakes her head a little.

“Darling Charlotte was busy playing house.” Cameron just stares at her, “So, where is he?”

“No, she didn’t bother calling my father and I for like...how long has it been, Char, a year?” Cam continues, shaking his head, “You always favored Mum. Set on acting like her too.” He sighs a little, “So, I’ll ask again, where is Anders?”

“I don’t know.” Charlotte finally replies, frustrated as her voice raises. She exhales slowly, lowering her voice, “I don’t know. I’ve been...staying with Mum and her girlfriend.” She notices his confused, disbelieving look before she continues, frustrated, “I told Anders that I wanted to go back to school, so he tried to kill me...drove me into oncoming traffic.”

“Oh my god.” Jac lifts her hand, slowly reaching up and removing her glasses from her face.

“I don’t know where he is and I don’t want to know...as long as he isn’t near me.”
Cameron steps closer to his sister, instantly regretting how he was speaking to her before. “I’m so sorry, Char.” His voice above a whisper, knowing she had garnered attention and rendered them an audience.

“And you can’t tell Dad yet. Please, promise me, you won’t tell Dad any of this.” Charlotte’s voice pleading, “I can’t have Anders knowing where I’m staying.”

“Why don’t you both go on to the break room?” Fletch offers, “More private to speak in there.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve already taken up too much time.” The young woman sniffs quickly, attempting to contain her emotions. Hide them away like her brother expected of her, “I’ll go back to AAU...Mum was going to meet me up here to see you, but it’s fine.” She begins to back away from him.

“Please, let’s...let’s just go and get a drink.” Cameron motions to the direction with his hand, “Tea...coffee. You love coffee.” She’s a shell of the woman she once was. Anders Hero did a number on her. “You can have all the coffee you want.”

“Coffee is shit in the breakroom.” Jac continues to watch the pair, “Get her something better, Dr. Dunn.”

“No, I’m pregnant, so I’m trying to avoid the stuff like the plague.” Charlotte sighs slowly, smirking with amusement when she sees her brother do a double take once her statement dawns on him.

Cameron beams, still looking at his sister, but it’s obvious he’s speaking with the others. “Call me Uncle Cam.”

“No, I don’t think I will.” Jac shakes her head, a hint of mirth to her voice.

“Well, I will. Congratulations to you, Charlotte...Uncle Cam.” Fletch moves around the desk, standing near the other woman as he grabs a folder, “I have four myself.”

“And he doesn’t let us forget it.” The redhead raises her eyebrows.
Cameron takes a moment, offering his elbow for his sister to hold. “Your tea awaits.” He’s glad when she obliges with her better hand as he begins to lead them toward the aforementioned breakroom, “I won’t tell Dad where you are, but you should really consider telling him that you’re okay.” He pauses, thinking about the pictures across social media of his father out at various pubs watching football matches with Anders Hero and a few other friends that were obviously younger than his father. “I can tell him, if you want. He should know what was done to you.”

“Not yet, Cam. We both know what’s going to happen if you do.” Charlotte faces forward, “You should come over for dinner tonight. Moroccan chicken with sweet potato mash.” The young woman pauses, “You can peel sweet potatoes to make it up to me.”

“Make what up to you?”

“For being a proper prat before.”

The young man nods slowly, seeing that their relationship was going to get back to where it was before she even left, very quickly. “Fair enough. I should be cutting out around six or seven. Would that give you enough time?” They finally reach the breakroom and he pulls out a chair for her to sit in once they’re inside.

Charlotte nods, taking the seat, “Well, if I need more time, I’ll just make Mum start in your stead.”

“Oh, that’s right. You said Mum is home.” Cameron smiles a little toward her, “Did she come back for you or did you surprise her?”

“She came back to surprise Serena and I shocked her instead.” She nods slowly, leaning against the table with her better side, “I didn’t realize how much I needed her in my corner until she was standing right in front of me…and I couldn’t hide from a family member anymore.”

“Well now you have me as well.” He nods, remembering his sister’s love for Earl Grey tea. He fills the electric kettle with water before putting it on the base and turning it on, “So, when is the little ankle-biter due?”

Charlotte raises an eyebrow, realizing she never asked Fleur during the ultrasound, but able to do the math in her head, “I’m twelve weeks now…so...” She shrugs using just her better shoulder, lifting the corner of her mouth in a smirk, “I’m starting to show. Not too much, but I look as if I’ve eaten a
large lunch if it weren’t for this...flowy top that Serena bought me.” The loose fitting, floral patterned top seems to fit her perfectly, as if it were made exactly for her.

Cameron huffs his soft amusement, folding his arms over his chest as he looks to her, “It’s all so much to process.” He would continue to protect his sister, “I should go have a discussion with your ex.”

“And that’s why I haven’t phoned you since I was in hospital.” She sighs, “I don’t want you to defend my honor.”

“I can’t just sit back knowing what I know.” The young man says quietly, not believing his sister would even want him to. “And Dad...if he knows just what you went through...”

“He would defend Anders before he thought of me, Cameron.” The young woman says simply and she was right. Her brother knew she was correct. No doubt about any of it. “And he would beat the living daylights out of you...and we’d both be victims. No, I don’t want to give him that satisfaction.” Charlotte’s voice hushing toward the end, “I want to go invisible when it comes to him. I need to for protection.” She swallows, “Dad wants to keep gallivanting around like he’s going through some midlife crisis and needs to be one with the boys, let him. If that’s what makes him happy, who am I to stop him.”

“His daughter, Char.” Cameron shakes his head slowly, “You’re his daughter. His favorite. He would move heaven and earth for you-”

“He hasn’t once tried to contact me. Never questioned where I was during my radio silence. He would just take Anders’ word for it.” Charlotte watches her brother, “and Anders would come home...and rub it in my face that he didn’t care enough to...even argue to see me.” She can feel herself growing a bit upset, but swallows the emotions back. “So, let Dad be Dad.”

Cameron walks nearer to his sister, crouching down in front of her as he affectionately takes her hand in his. “I’m on your side here. I will always be on your side.” He notices her subtle nod, causing him to smile softly.
Bernie visits AAU, glad to see some old and new faces.

Fletch relays information revealed to him, unaware that it wasn't meant to be spread.

Bernie makes her way to her girlfriend’s office, chuckling to herself when Donna Jackson catches sight of her and begins to wave excitedly. With her hand on the office door, she changes her mind and makes her way to the nurses’ station, taking an eager hug from the nurse. “How are you, Donna?”

“I’m doing great.” Donna lets her go, “Does Serena know you’re here?”

“Well, she knew I was bringing Charlotte in for her physio.” The woman nods, absently adjusting her purse strap as it rests over her shoulder. “Where would I find her?”

“Oh, she’s currently in a meeting with Ms. Tate and Ric, but I imagine she should be returning soon.” The young woman nods, taking note how the former trauma surgeon slowly glances around the room, “How is Charlotte doing?”

Bernie offers a flash of a closed mouth smile, “Oh, she’s ace. Just popped up to Darwin to visit Cameron.” She continues to take in her surroundings, “I was just here not terribly long ago. Many new faces already. F1s. I bet Serena’s having a field day with them all.” Knowing her girlfriend’s nature of putting the young students through their paces. “I think Ric likes torturing them also. It’s why they get on so well.”

“You’re probably right.” Donna nods, still standing next to the woman as she leans back against the nurses’ station desktop. She turns around when she hears a throat softly being cleared from behind her.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, is Mr. Griffin still in that meeting?” Leah actually wasn’t listening in on them, though she was accustomed to keeping an ear out for everything. Today was her first day back after narrowly missing her own termination for violating many rules and regulations including medical privacy laws by claiming she wasn’t certain Serena Campbell didn’t break them by treating family. Ric Griffin wasn’t happy, but Abigail Tate let her off with a probation.
The nurse nods, knowing Ric had been in that meeting for over an hour, “I can get someone else to sign off on something for you, if you need.”

“Well, I was told that everything must go through an AAU consultant exclusively and I wasn’t to involve another party if unnecessary.” She repeats what was told to her during her disciplinary hearing. She was also told that Ric would be her supervising clinician and she should go to him first. They wanted to give her unnecessary rules, she would go out of her way to abide by them.

Donna raises her brow, knowing what the F1 was doing. “They’ll probably be back soon. In the meantime, Dr. Leah Faulkner, this is Major Berenice Wolfe, trauma surgeon extraordinaire. She used to work here some time ago. Had her own unit and everything.”

Leah grins broadly, offering her hand, “You performed one the seven successful atrio caval shunts in the world. Your reputation precedes you.” She leans in a little, “I must admit, I’m a bit of a fan. That surgery was one of the reasons I wanted to do my clinical experience here. Hospital of excellence.”

Bernie accepts the handshake, chuckling a little to herself at the eager F1’s response. “I do hope you’ve heard all good things.”

“Oh, the best.” She vigorously shakes her hand, finally stopping to just continue holding onto it, “Are you returning to work at Holby?”

“No, not yet at least.” Donna interrupts, “No, Bernie is Serena’s girlfriend.”

“Dr. Faulkner, haven’t you some patients to address?” Serena calls out as she makes her way down the hall, having just stepped through the double doors. Yes, Leah was going to see most of her ire. She’s been seeing that ire today anyway. She should have known she would.

“Yes, Ms. Campbell.” The young doctor quickly lets go of the other woman’s hand, rushing away from the desk as she loops her stethoscope around her neck. For some reason, Leah had never put two and two together. She never thought the woman she had read about doing such an interesting surgery would be Serena’s other half. She was jealous, but she wasn’t exactly who of. If only she could be with both of them. Leah quickly shakes her head, finally reaching one of the beds, any bed, really. She picks up a patient folder, just anything to get her mind off of what was currently happening.
“Serena.” Bernie gave her partner a look that the woman was just overreacting. She knows exactly how her partner treats new student doctors. She wants to be the one they fear ever getting as their consultant superior. “Let the girl have a breather.”

“If you only knew, dear.” Serena moves in, quickly kissing her partner, “No Charlotte?”

“She’s visiting with Cam.” When the other woman appears surprised, she continues, “I didn’t expect it either. Hopefully my son acts cordial toward his sister.” It is obvious that Bernie is a bit worried about the whole interaction. She wouldn’t admit it, though she was able to remember the snide comments he would make that she had every right to hear when she was away for stretches of time. She worries that he might be the same way with her daughter.

“He had better.” Serena nods, leaning an elbow on the desktop. Donna having returned to the other side, “I do apologize for just how long that had taken. Demands updates every other day about you know who and what protocols we are to follow with her.” She sighs softly, “At least she’s more Ric’s problem now than mine...and is walking a very fine line.”

Donna raises an eyebrow, smirking a little, “Hopefully things work out then.” She offers a stack of thick folders, “Two new patients. We’re getting the ED runoff. One seems to be a serious asthma attack, which I’ve already put them on a nebulizer with Albuterol. I reckon you could sign off on that as if it were your brilliant idea. Other may have an orbital fracture after a midday argy-bargy session at his favorite watering hole.”

The consultant inhales slowly, closing her eyes as she does so. Serena releases her breath slowly, “Okay, go ahead and get him a head CT. I’ll listen in on our asthmatic.” She lifts her head up to look over to her partner, “Bernie, are you sticking around?”

“No, you seem rather busy.” Bernie leans in, giving girlfriend another casual kiss. “I’ll see you at home. I imagine I’m going to be helping Charlotte make something for supper.”

“Just follow her orders. She knows what she’s doing.” Serena offers her partner a smirk, watching as she begins backing away.

“Of course, I’d rather it be edible.” She begins chuckling, offering the woman a grin. Turning, Bernie returns to the elevator area, pressing the button for an elevator car to Darwin, surprised when it opens instantly. She still had yet to tell her partner that she would be staying. Serena had learned not to ask her as to not think of it. Bernie knows that. She would act the same way when Serena would visit Nairobi. Then cry for days after she left, feeling like a part of herself was suddenly missing. Different from her children or anyone else. The doors open and she steps off the lift,
glancing around. “Well, this has changed quite a bit.” She mumbles to herself.

“Bernie Wolfe.” Fletch calls out to her, having just exited his office, “about time for you showed back up here.” He offers his hand, smiling broadly when she accepts it. “Had the pleasure of meeting your lovely daughter. Shame what happened to her.” Fletch had always amused her during her time on AAU. A man who knew exactly what he was doing, but one could have a drink with at the end of the night and you would have absolutely no idea he was a nurse for a living.

Bernie nods a little, “She will carry on...we always do.”

“Car into oncoming traffic.” He shakes her head, not knowing the young woman never told her mother. “Poor girl. I’m surprised you’ve been able to restrain yourself.”

“Who says I have?” Bernie places her hands on her hips, flashing him a quick smirk. “Is Cameron with her currently?”

“Oh, yeah. Breakroom. Think he made her tea.” Fletch nods, motioning toward the aforementioned area, “Need me to walk you over?”

“No, I’ve worked on this floor before. I’ll find it. Thanks.” She walks past him, his statement running through her head. *Oncoming traffic.* Bernie wanted to hurt Anders Hero before, but now she could very well murder him.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Charlotte proudly displays her unexpected cooking acumen.

Family dinner doesn't go to plan in the Campbell-Wolfe household.

Chapter Notes

12 weeks. I feel like I should write this in the notes of each chapter.

Charlotte sits at the kitchen table, eyes closed. She holds a fork in her hand, but her food is generally uneaten. She had made dinner for her family and they were having a lively discussion around her. Meanwhile, her head pounds. Harder and harder. Nothing fixes it. Things fade off, the room growing quiet.

Serena reaches a hand out to the young woman sitting directly next to her, gently touching her wrist, “Charlotte.”

“Sorry.” She mumbles softly, “I’m just...I’ve a headache...and a bit dizzy.” She keeps herself quiet.

“Could be your glucose levels.” The woman keeps her tone low and steady, “How about eating a little bit? You’ve taken your Ondansetron, correct?”

“I’ve a headache, I’m not nauseous.” Charlotte shakes her head, squinting open her eyes from underneath the light above them, “Please, don’t stop eating on my account. I didn’t make this for me. I made it for you all. I insist.” She flashes her attempt at a reassuring smile.

Cam wasn’t expecting to see just how gentle Serena Campbell was going to be with his sister. He doesn’t know exactly how long she’s known Charlotte, but a part of him is impressed. “How did you learn to cook so well, Char? We all know Mum and Dad weren’t able to.”

Bernie scowls playfully toward her son, “Did you starve?”
“Every chance I got.”

Charlotte smirks a little, listening to their sparring, “I’ve made a desert...when you’re ready.”

“I’m not ready until you’re ready for it.” Serena focuses on the young woman still, a worried expression on her face. “Would a cool cloth help?”

“Please, just eat.” The young woman mumbles with a soft sigh.

“I had awful headaches when I was pregnant with Cameron...I still have them from him.” Bernie focuses on her daughter, lifting a forkful of mashed sweet potato to her mouth.

“Oh, ha ha, Mum.” Cameron’s tone sarcastic, quick.

“Honestly though, your Paracetamol is probably the best thing for it...and rest. Only thing I could ever do to get rid of them is to do what they wanted me to do.” She explains, “if it meant to sleep all the day long, that’s exactly what I would do. Happened quite often.”

“Bernice.” Serena says quietly, sliding from her seat. She notices as the young woman starts to slump over and effectively catches her once she topples sideways from her position in the dining room chair, “When was the last time she’s eaten?” She slowly helps the young woman to lie flat on the floor.

Bernie stands, glancing to the young woman’s plate, “Not recently.” She shakes her head, “I thought she had made something this morning, but I believe she had an apple instead. All before her therapy session.” The woman moves to her daughter’s other side.

“Cameron, smelling salts are in the first aid. Cabinet above the sink in the toilet.”

Cameron shoves a bite of food into his mouth before pushing away from the table and jogging to the room in question once he stands. He remembers the layout of the house from when Serena had him over for dinner a bit ago. When he started working back at Holby again, she had told him to tell her if he had any issues with Jac Naylor or anyone else that she would take care of it. If he was hungry, she would take care of it. Sure, he teased her by calling her Step mum, but it was done out of love
from him. Cameron quickly opens the cabinet he was told to open, pulling down the soft shelled
green pack and unzippers it, retrieving the small ammonium carbonate pack. He returns to his former
consultant superior, cracking the pack before handing it to her.

You think they love you, but only I love you. You think they care, but they haven’t looked for you
once. You will be my wife and you will serve me...because that is what wives do for their husbands.
That’s why your mother isn’t here, not still a wife, because your father refused to make her see
reason. Sometimes, reasons hurts. Charlotte turns away from the distinct smell, opening her eyes
slowly to take in the room around her.

“There is.” Bernie holds her daughter’s feet up, shaking them a little to encourage blood flow.
“When I said to rest, I didn’t mean right away.” Her tone both caring and teasing of her daughter.

Serena gives her girlfriend an amused look before glancing down to the young woman who was
resting her face against her knee. “You need to remember to eat, little miss. I don’t need a heart
attack at this point in my life.” She gently runs her nails through the young woman’s hair, using her
other hand to assess the young woman’s pulse, “Bradycardic.”

“You’re just going to put me back to sleep...playing with my hair like that.” Charlotte raises her
eyebrows, eyes closing slowly, mostly to shield them from the light overhead.

“What about some ice cream?” Bernie offers, “we need to get something on your stomach.” She tilts
her head to meet Serena’s eyes, “Slowed respirations. Cam,” She doesn’t look to her son, instead
focusing on her daughter once more, “make some tea.”

“There should be breakfast tea in the tin next to the fridge.” Serena nods, her attention on the young
woman in front of her, “Why are we asking for tea, Mr. Dunn?”

Cam smirks to himself, shaking his head slowly, “Always teaching.” He moves over to the stove,
glad there was already a clean kettle on the stove and he wouldn’t need to root around in the lower
cabinets for one. He fills the container with water, setting it on the stove as he ignites it, “Caffeine
would cause a spike of blood pressure, offering a temporary fix so that Charlotte could at least have
some proper food.” He glances over his shoulder as he opens a few packs of the tea, “I work on
Darwin. I see this every day.” Opening the tea, he holds it up, it’s high quality, loose leave in a mesh
tea bag. Of course it was.

Bernie smiles a bit to herself, proud of her son, “How’s that, Professor Campbell?”
“Cameron’s never disappointed me yet.” Serena smirks, picking her head up to the young man who was watching her again, offering a wink.

“Give it time.” Charlotte grins, obviously teasing her brother.

“Says the unwed, pregnant girl on the floor who doesn’t remember how to eat properly.” Cameron answers quickly, regretting it when the room falls silent for a moment, “Char-”

“That was a good one.” The young woman closes her eyes.

“Oh, no you don’t. Stay awake.” Serena shakes her head.

“I’m really not sleeping. Promise.” Charlotte glances over to the woman next to her head, feeling as her mother gently places her legs down. “I’ve never fainted before...at least, not that I remember. This is bizarre.”

The woman sitting on the floor thinks for a moment, “It’s common in pregnancy for many reasons. This may be an isolated incident. If it occurs again, I can consult with Fleur and see what medication or lifestyle change would be your best option.” She notices as her partner returns with a couple cushions from the sofa, placing the larger one under Charlotte’s legs, the smaller under her head, and taking a seat next to them. “I never got to ask you, how was physio?” Anything to keep her talking.

“They electrocuted my shoulder.” The young woman smirks, “It was amazing.”

Bernie huffs a quick chuckle to herself, “TENs treatment went very well. We picked up a home unit.”

“That’s a fantastic option to work in tandem with your Paracetamol, and maybe toward the end stages of wearing your sling, you can cut away Paracetamol all together and just use your TENs device.” Serena nods. “Those physio people are brilliant sometimes.”

Cameron pours the tea into a mug, adding milk and sugar. He carries it over to the women, who were just sitting casually next to his sister as she lies on the floor, and handing it to his mother. “Char, what did you make for desert?” He puts his hands up in an innocent fashion when he receives a look from Serena, who now has his sister leaning up against her, “Look, I just want to know what I have to look forward to...and if she’s going to nap, it doesn’t mean we need to abstain from the desert she
“Still sticking with him never disappointing you?” Charlotte carefully sips the tea, grinning from behind her mug.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Anders Hero puts his plan into motion by manipulating an old friend.

Cameron accidentally gives up his sister's location to his father.

Chapter Notes

18 weeks.

Anders Hero stares at his mobile telephone as it rests on the glass top surface in front of him. After two months of being virtually alone, he needed his Charlotte back. He loves her, he actually does, but he knows his anger could get the best of him sometimes. He clears his throat, lifting the mobile to his hands and touching the screen. Time to act.

Marcus Dunn slides his finger on the screen of his mobile, accepting the ring from his old friend, “Is this something that can wait until we meet up in a few hours? I’m...about to scrub in for theater.”

“It’s an emergency.” He clears his throat, “Charlotte’s missing.”

He stops moving, shaking his head negatively, “What do you mean she’s missing, Andy?”

“I mean she wasn’t here when I arrived home from work.” Anders shakes his head, it had been longer than that, but he wasn’t about to tell the man. “I’ve phoned local shops near me. Hospital said they won’t give me any information one way or the other, I’ve driven around for hours. Marcus, I think she might have been taken. There’s been...a few kidnappings around the neighborhood.” There hadn’t been, but he knew the man wasn’t going to check.

“I’ll phone Cameron, he works at Holby City. I’ll see if there’s anything he can find.” Marcus paces a little, “What about police?”

“Needs to be twenty-four hours. It’s only been about sixteen so far.” The man smirks a little, thinking how well this is going to work out for him. “Have you spoken to her?”
“I...no...no, I haven’t.” The older man tilts his arms across his chest, realizing he hasn’t spoken to his daughter in about a year. Something about this doesn’t seem right. Something seems off, but he trusts this man. They’re close friends and Anders has helped him out from time to time. He’s heard how much Anders loves Charlotte. “I need to take care of this. I’ll have someone phone around during theater.”

“Thanks, I’m incredibly worried about her.” Anders disconnects the phone call, tossing the mobile onto the table again. “She’ll be home soon enough.”

Marcus stands still in the hall, just outside the washing room. He looks down at the glow of his phone for a moment. Knowing he needs to phone Cameron now. His family comes first. Before all of this. However, getting this far and pulling out suddenly wouldn’t be fair to his patient or his own reputation.

Cameron sips his coffee, feeling the vibration of the mobile in his pocket. He reaches in, holding it in front of him to look at the screen and approving the call before placing it at his ear. “Dad, how are you?” His tone quick as he stands at the small island within the cantine, pouring sugar and cream into his coffee.

“Listen, don’t panic.” The surgeon leans against the wall within the hall of Saint James’ theater area, “Andy just called me. Your sister is missing.”

Cam rolls his eyes a bit when he hears his father use the man’s pet name. “Is that what he told you?”

Not expecting that reply, Marcus continues, “we need to help find her.”

“No, we really don’t. She’s fine.”

“She’s missing, Cameron!” He yells into the mobile, stopping to take a deep breath when he realizes he just yelled in a very delicate portion of the hospital. “My little girl, your sister, is missing and it doesn’t even sound as if you care.”

“You haven’t spoken to her in so long, Dad. Not even during the holidays.” Cameron continues, “You said they went to his family celebrations and it was just the two of us...twiddling thumbs last year. Remember?” When he’s met with silence, he continues, “You cannot tell him that you know. You cannot tell him that Charlotte is safe.” He sighs softly, “I’ll...I’ll have her contact you later.”
It makes the man think. Marcus closes his eyes slowly, knowing he hasn’t been the father he promised he would be to her. “I feel like my heart is going to come through my chest.” His tone soft, caring, “I don’t understand.”

“He was beating her, Dad, and now you’ve been playing right into his hand.”

“I know Andy. He wouldn’t beat anyone.” He shakes his head, “Your sister told you that herself?”

“My sister didn’t need to say anything, I saw the bruises a couple months ago.” Cam says quietly, resting the mobile between his cheek and shoulder as he checks his wristwatch, “That’s how long she’s been away from him, Dad. Not today, or yesterday. Two months...and she’s so happy for a change. Mum is caring for her.”

“So...she’s staying round Serena Campbell’s.” Marcus says quietly, having heard that his wife had shacked up with the other woman. Of all people, Serena Campbell, a woman he actually respected immensely. “Your sister...is staying with Serena...” It wasn’t a question, it was something he figured out quickly.

“Dad-”

“She wanted to be a wife, Cameron. I didn’t tell her to do that. Being a wife in a successful marriage means working things out.” He begins to shake his head, “I know Anders Hero. I’ve known him for years and years. The number one thing I know is that he wouldn’t hurt a fly. So, if your mother is telling you-”

“Are you kidding me right now?” Cameron yells into his mobile, causing the entire cantine area to focus on him. He makes his way to stand outside the door, near the car park, his voice quieter. “I saw bruises on Char’s neck, and everywhere else. Her clavicle was broken. There were police reports made while she was in hospital.” He glances around, hoping no one from Darwin is around, “He tried to kill her, Dad.”

“Why didn’t she ever call me then?” Marcus shakes his head slowly.

“Probably because she knew you would act like this.”
The man looks straight ahead, unsure of what to do. “This really isn’t our business, Cameron. This is for them to work out.” He doesn’t know why he’s conditioned to protect his friend in this instance. He hasn’t seen his daughter in so long and misses her greatly. However, Anders cares for her. She doesn’t have to work a single day for the rest of her life. Anders promised him that he would tend to her. Could he have been so wrong? “Marriages are about working through your struggles instead of just throwing that commitment away.”

“They aren’t married...nor will they ever be.” Cameron listens intently, “Don’t apply your issues with Mum to Charlotte’s case. They aren’t remotely similar.” He glances around again, falling a bit silent as he just takes in the different people as they pass by, “Do you want me to have her contact you later or are you going to continue with this abuser apologist bollocks?”

Marcus swallows, falling silent as he stands there a moment. “I really miss her, Cam.”

“I know you do, Dad.” The young man nods a little, “I’ll phone her in a bit...set it up. If she isn’t up to it, Dad.”

“Don’t force her.”

“I don’t think I can force her to do anything anymore. She’s a stronger woman because of the things that happened, but she’s had to work very hard to get that point.” Cameron shakes his head, “Please, don’t do anything that could possibly jeopardize her struggle.”

Marcus glances toward the door of the room he should have been in a good twenty minutes prior, “Wouldn’t dream of it.”
Charlotte shares a pregnancy milestone with her mother.

Bernie reveals her plans for Christmas.

When a blast from the past rears their ugly head, Charlotte doubts her resolve.

Chapter Notes

18 weeks.

Bernie walks next to her daughter, both wearing their exercise attire as they make quick jogging spurts through the neighborhood near their home. This has become a daily habit of the pair since her daughter no longer had to wear her immobilizer. “It’s positively gorgeous today.”

“I can see my breath.” Charlotte holds her mouth open, able to make smoke rings. “Years of cigarette smoking allows one to do some...interesting things.” She waves her eyebrows a little, being playful with her mother. She lifts her water bottle to her mouth, carrying one with each and every walk, drinking a bit. She’s been very careful about avoiding dehydration and eating meals on a near schedule since her fainting spell weeks prior. It was a wake up call of sorts. “Did you decide what you’re going to get Serena for Christmas? I know you were trying to brainstorm.”

“I uh...” The woman nods a little, not stopping her stride, “I think I may ask her to marry me.” She finally pauses when she sees her daughter had stopped a few paces back, “Oh, come on. You knew it was coming. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“No.” She places one hand on her hip, the other to her eighteen-weeks-pregnant bump as she just stares at the ground. “No, I think it just moved.” The young woman begins to smile a bit, “Not much, just...enough.” Charlotte slowly lifts her head to look to her mother.

A grin slowly breaks across Bernie’s face as she moves back to her daughter’s side. “ Sounds to me like Wolfe Cub wanted to give their opinion on the matter.” She pauses, “Are you okay?”

“I just...I felt something similar this morning and I didn’t think anything of it.” Charlotte shakes her
head a little, carefully taking hold of her mother’s hand as she starts to walk again, “I think proposing to Serena for Christmas is a great idea, Mum. It will probably overshadow the cheetah print loafers I’ve purchased for her, but I reckon it would be worth it.”

“Yeah...I haven’t bought her a ring or anything like that.” She shakes her head, “I just...don’t feel like anything is worthy enough.” Bernie shakes her head a little, surprised she’s exposing this side of herself to one of her children. “I don’t know if anything like that exists.”

“Now who is being dramatic.” The young woman rolls her eyes a little, “She’s posh, but she also fancies simplicity. So, nothing too...extravagant.”

“This is going to be harder than I anticipated.”

“Puts it mildly, I think.” Charlotte reaches into her jacket pocket, removing her mobile as it begins to vibrate periodically with text messages. She swallows, offering the device to her mother as a look of worry grows in her eyes. She doesn’t stop though. Not again. Charlotte knows she needs to get back to the house at this point.

“He knows? Who knows?” Bernie furrows her brow, letting go of her daughter’s hand to scroll through the messages, “Char.”

“Mum, I can’t...” Her voice full of emotion. “I can’t risk it.”

“Okay, just calm yourself. You haven’t anything to worry about.” She says quietly, “We’ll call your father with my mobile when we reach the house.” Bernie looks behind her quickly when she hears a car nearing, but not passing.

Charlotte glances over her shoulder, noticing the distinct smirk from the man behind the wheel, Anders Hero. “Mum, we need to run.” Her tone quiet as she attempts to keep fear induced tears from her eyes.

Bernie doesn’t ask questions of her daughter, hearing the car behind her rev his engine. “You can’t run from a car, Charlotte.” She says softly, taking hold of her daughter’s hand again after touching the screen of the mobile dropping an area marker to her partner and taking a picture of the man’s automobile to send to her as well. “Stand your ground.”
“I’m not strong enough.”

“Yes, you are. I believe in you.” The woman mumbles to her daughter, stopping their movement. She turns, watching the man climb out of a car, closing the car door behind himself, “Lovely day, isn’t it?” Bernie calls

Anders stands there, “I’ve looked everywhere for you.” He looks as if he has tears in his eyes, “I thought you had died in hospital.” He focuses on the younger woman.

“A part of me did.” Charlotte does as her mother instructed, “the part that cared about you.”

He chuckles with cold indignation, “You wound me, but...you and I both know that isn’t true.” He moves a bit closer, seeing as the older woman stands in front of her daughter, between them, “And you must be Charlotte’s mother. It’s a pleasure to see where she gets her beautiful features from.”

“The pleasure is all yours.” Bernie doesn’t flinch, not letting her eyes wander from that of the man’s.

Anders grins slyly, staring into this older woman’s eyes as he continues to talk to his fiance, “Charlotte, that baby...my baby, needs both of their parents. You can’t do it alone...and if you think your mother and her parody of a significant other are going to help you, you’re wrong. She’s just going to leave again...like she always does.”

“My mother is a hero. She’s saved countless lives here and on the front line.” Charlotte answers, staying directly behind her mother. Knowing the woman would protect her no matter what.

“I’ve also taken plenty of lives as well.” Bernie keeps her demeanor relaxed, unsuspecting, “crushed windpipes, dislocated shoulders, broken arms, broken legs. Sometimes, I’d hurt them, then I’d mend them...just so that they learned. Not you though. No, you just crush people...injure and maim with no intention of helping them. No inclination to fess up to your actions and suffer the consequences.”

He doesn’t show fear. He wouldn’t, not to a woman. Anders lifts his hands in innocence, as he begins to back away from them a bit, toward his car, “I just wanted to speak to the mother of my child. I’m going to be a father...and I’ll be a damn good one for the rest of that child’s life. Charlotte, if you think you’re about to take that away from me by feeding your family some bullshit sob story...” He shakes his head, grinning, “I don’t think I need to continue.”
“I don’t think you should.” Bernie keeps her arms at her sides, not even the slightest bit phazed by the man, “Now, get back in your little car and leave her alone. If I see you around here again, I will end you.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Anders opens his car door, climbing behind the steering wheel. He knows he will just have to catch her when her mother isn’t around. That’s all this will take. The way Marcus talked, Bernie leaves constantly, never one to stick around for her children or anyone else. Yeah, it wouldn’t be long at all.

Charlotte watches as his wheels screech and create smoke behind the car before it pulls away. She exhales when he rounds the corner, “Thank you.”

Bernie shrugs, “He’s nothing. Beating on those weaker than you isn’t superiority, it’s cowardly.” She turns in her spot, facing her daughter, “Are you okay?” She carefully wraps her arms around the young woman, holding her closely. “I know that was probably terrifying for you.”

“Yeah.” The young woman clears her throat, “I just want to go home.”

“Of course.” The older woman nods, kissing her daughter’s forehead, keeping an arm around them as they begin to walk in the direction they need to.

“Why did you want me to phone Dad on your mobile instead of mine?” Charlotte leans her head against her mother’s shoulder as they walk as a relaxed pace, casually keeping her other hand to her middle, feeling the life within fluttering, “Because he doesn’t have my number?”

“Well, that’s one reason.” Bernie lifts her head, looking out in front of her, squinting her eyes a little, “My mobile is unable to be traced, government issued, but...he already knows where you are. Not something that you need to agonize over anymore.”

“Why agonize when I know the threat is here?” The young woman rolls her eyes at the idea, “I’m not...as strong as you are. You’ve had years of combat training just in case and I’ve had nothing. I have no backbone with him...no way to defend myself.”

“That’s not what I saw before.” A small smile shows on her face, “Not running is incredibly brave.”

“I didn’t run because you told me not to run.” Charlotte answers quietly. “If you weren’t with me, I’d
have been shoved into that car...and I wouldn’t have fought. I’d have gone willingly.”

“I don’t believe that’s true.” Bernie raises an eyebrow, “Because of the cub, I reckon you would have fought him until you couldn’t.” She can sense a fire in her daughter, something that existed before and she saw as anger years ago. That fire is ever evolving though. A passion for life and being a part of it. That fire was starting to return, but Bernie still doesn’t know what could possibly trigger the young woman to access it.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Bernie reveals news that no one wants to hear.

Serena reveals something about her past when helping Charlotte with a mild medical issue.

Chapter Notes

Same day as the last chapter. 18 weeks.

Serena glances over the thick novel she enjoys reading at the end of the day to help her wind down from work. However, with her partner pacing slightly at the thought of the bed, there was no way she would be able to concentrate. “Something you want to talk about?”

Bernie sighs, “I have to come up with another method of protection for her.” Her stride slow, arms folded over her chest with her head tilted back toward the ceiling. “She’s in the bath now, but I know she isn’t going to get any sleep tonight because of bloody Anders Hero.”

“Well, if she doesn’t get any sleep, I know you won’t and if you don’t get any sleep, I know I won’t. I, for one, would not like a houseful of cranky women tomorrow. One of whom is pregnant, and we’ve both been there before and know how...vindictive one has the ability to get due to lack of sleep.” She reaches over to her bedside table, obtaining the slim metal bookmark and sliding it between the pages before closing the large book to focus on the woman in front of her. “Darling, sit before a hole is worn in the hardwood.”

Doing as her girlfriend instructed, she lowers herself at the end of the bed, facing Serena and leaning against the foot board a bit. The room falls quiet for a moment before she finally speaks up, knowing her partner was going to wait for her to do so, “I don’t know how to sufficiently protect my daughter...and it terrifies me.”

“You’re with her all of the time, Berenice.” Serena adjusts her position to sit up a bit more, crossing her legs. “You have been her personal bodyguard.”

Bernie licks her lips in thought, no easy way to say it except to just put it all out there, “I um...I need
to go back to Nairobi.” When she notices the tears beginning to form in Serena’s eyes, she continues, “Just for...a week at most. I’m going to try to keep it to a few days. I just need to tie some loose ends.”

“Can’t you just postpone?”

“Technically, but...the sooner I take care of these things, the sooner I can be home. I have to visit on occasion to ensure the hospital is running smoothly and this time-” She inhales, folding her arms across her chest, “-I would be packing my things up...to stay here for good.”

“Truly?” Serena’s face begins to brighten up. Seeing Bernie’s little nod, she finds herself lurching forward, placing her hands on either side of the woman’s face as her lips meet her girlfriend’s.

Bernie chuckles in their kiss, her hand gently running down her partner’s side, resting on her hip, “I mean, if you’d rather I stay there-”

“Shut up.” She gently plays with the folded hem of her girlfriend’s t-shirt, caressing the skin underneath and resting there. Serena finds herself staring into the eyes of the other woman, “You know that you don’t need to worry about her care while you’re away. I’ll take care of her.” Her voice just above a whisper, able to tell her girlfriend’s mind was elsewhere. “I’ll take her to work with me if that’s what it takes.”

“Thank you.” She pecks her girlfriend’s lips again, simply holding onto her.

“I’m really glad you lot weren’t going to start your wild tantric sex routine.” Charlotte says from the door, eyebrow raised with a bloody hand towel held to her nose. Clad in a pair of simple cotton pajama pants and form-fitting cotton t-shirt. “To my credit, I knocked about twelve times, so I thought you were asleep and I’d wake you up...I’m glad it wasn’t either of those things I mentioned.”

Serena blushing as she smirks, rolling off of her girlfriend as she also pushes to sit up on the edge of the bed. “Nosebleed?” Seeing the young woman’s quick nod, “I had them all the time with Elinor.” She didn’t speak of her daughter very much around Charlotte and she wasn’t sure if she was doing it consciously or unconsciously.

“It’s been going on for ten minutes.” The young woman sighs slowly, “I’ve probably ruined your towel.”
“I’ve got this.” Serena pats her girlfriend’s knee affectionately as she stands, “Let’s get you some ice and a nasal tampon, Charlotte.”

“How different is that from a regular tampon?” Charlotte lets the woman take her hand as she passes, following her slowly as she pulled into the hall.

“It goes in your nose.” She winks to the young woman, hearing the young woman make an amused sound.

“I really didn’t mean to bother you all.” The young woman sighs softly, “I’ve dealt with nosebleeds before, but never for ten minutes.” She pauses, “That’s a lie, once I did break it, but I set it back into place.” When the other woman glances to her again, Charlotte shrugs, “Sometimes you pick things up.”

“Like fixing your own broken nose? That isn’t exactly a life skill I think people respect enough.” Serena motions for the young woman to head to the kitchen, “Get yourself some ice. I’ll get the First Aid.”

“Yes, Ms. Campbell. Whatever you say, Ms. Campbell. Am I allowed to put the ice in a bag, Ms. Campbell or should I just smash it into my face?” Charlotte teases the other woman, “I think I just heard your eye roll, Ms. Campbell.”

“My F1 students do not sound like that.” Serena calls, obtaining the green pack from the first floor bathroom, cabinet above the sink. She returns to the kitchen area, unzipping the pack to obtain what she needed. Serena lifts her head as she places the pack on the kitchen island, “Thought for certain you were going to take smashing the ice in your face method.”

“Different route all together. Frozen peas.” The young woman watches her mother’s girlfriend, “How has that Leah girl been doing?”

“Leah?” She furrows her brow, “Why on Earth do you want to know about her?” Her tone incredulous as she prepares the Adrenalin, tampon, small cup of sterile saline, and surgical tweezers.

“She worships the ground you walk on like a puppy.” Charlotte smirks ever so slightly, “And she was one of the first people, next to you and Fleur, to see this kid for the first time with me. Like it or not, I find her interesting. I can’t wait to speak to her more when I hide out in your office.”
Serena opens the Adrenalin, placing the end of the nasal packing tampon in the cup of saline. “Exactly how long were you standing there?”

“Long enough.”

The woman raises an eyebrow, ‘You’re lucky, I thought I only had gauze packing for you, but I must have...borrowed a few of these at one point or another.” Serena removes the air syringe from the sterile pack. “Usually we say to keep this in for one to three days, but I think when you wake tomorrow morning should be enough.”

“That’s too bad.” Charlotte closes her eyes as Serena inserts the packing into one of her nostrils, inflating it after. She pouts pitifully, “How do I look?”

“Beautiful as ever.” Serena gently places a hand to the young woman’s cheek, gliding her thumb along the cheekbone. The room goes quiet for a moment. She thinks of the time Elinor was twelve and tried to play netball, only to be on the wrong end of a wayward throw. The woman swallows, shaking her head as she brings her hand down, beginning to clean up, “Do you think you’ll be okay to sleep? I can make you chamomile tea.”

“I don’t even think that’s going to help.” She shakes her head, reaching into the pack for the medical tape. Charlotte rips a piece off, securing the inflating end to her cheek so it doesn’t hang. The room falls silent for a moment, “I haven’t...I haven’t been able to sleep yet without being back there. Without hearing his voice or seeing his eyes.” Her tone soft, “Anders has these beautiful hazel eyes, but...they’re terrifying when the light hits them right. Like a man possessed.”

“I understand the feeling.” Realizing the young woman was looking to her, Serena continues, “My ex-husband, Edward, was an alcoholic. A bad one.”

Charlotte had never realized maybe Serena may have helped her for personal reasons other than some replacement for her daughter, “He hit you?”

“Just once, he was quick and immediately regretted it. However, I hit back and he instantly realized his error in judgement...was toward the wrong woman.” Serena folds her arms, “It was the cheating that pissed me off.” She thinks for a moment, “Which sounds ludicrous, but...it’s the truth.”

“Inability to trust.” The young woman absently brings her hand to her middle when she feels a flutter, “Men are proper terrible.”
“Tell me about it.”

“Hey, um...” Charlotte swallows, going quiet a moment, “Don’t tell Mum about-”

“Charlotte, you can always tell me things without worrying that I’ll run to your mother.” Serena smiles softly toward the pitiful young woman still sitting against the bar stool at the kitchen island, “There are plenty things that mothers don’t need to know...but plenty we do as well. This just falls in with the first bit.”

Climbing from the chair, Charlotte moves closer to the woman before wrapping her arms around her in a hug, “Thanks, Stepmum.”

“Oh, here we go.” Serena rolls her eyes at the pet name. However, a part of her loves it. Loves that these two young people, about Elinor’s age, know they can depend on her simply because they think of her as family even though her own personal idea of family has always been a bit skewed. This is her family now.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

When grocery shopping with Serena, Charlotte asks her an important question.

In turn, Serena reveals her Christmas plans for Bernie.

Chapter Notes

19 weeks.

Serena pushes the cart slowly down the aisle of the grocer, watching as the young woman pulls things off the shelf and nonchalantly tosses them into the trolly. Bernie had left a few mornings ago without any fanfare. Having called a taxi as to not disturb anyone. Serena found herself crying for an hour after waking. Only a week, she kept reminding herself. “Why do we need that much pasta?”

Charlotte pauses, not having realized she had grabbed four boxes of dried pasta already, “True.” She puts three of the boxes back, then the fourth, “I'll just make my own.” She sighs a little, “It should taste better anyway...and we already have flour at home.”

“We certainly do. Quite a large bag in the cupboard.”

She sighs a little, “You know, I think that maybe I should get a job.” She folds her arms, walking closer to the other woman, “I’ve never had one before and it would probably be a...good thing. I can’t depend on you and Mum forever.”

“I think you should do whatever you want, but...” Serena raises her eyebrows, “I think you should wait until after the baby is born...get everything all settled in and then start looking, if that’s what you want.”

Charlotte absently places her hand on the side of her belly as she walks, “You say what I want like you have a better idea.”

“I do. I think you should go back to school.” The woman answers honestly, noticing Charlotte stiffen
up a bit. “You’re an incredibly intelligent young woman and you know far too much about helping others that it would be a sin if you didn’t pursue higher education.”

“Helping others...”

“Yes, I think you should think about training to be a nurse...or doctor.” Serena answers simply, “There are plenty of accelerated courses, most of which you can do over the computer while taking care of the baby, if you’d like.” She places a hand on the small of the young woman’s back, “You’re brilliant and I know you would be amazing in the healthcare industry.”

The subject is incredibly sore for her. It’s what caused her accident in the first place. Charlotte can feel tears forming in her eyes, feeling the need to change the subject, she clears her throat. “You know, I realized...after finding Milky Buttons under my pillow this morning, that Mum isn’t going to be here for my twenty week checkup.”

“She might be.” The older woman shrugs, “She said she’s only going to stay a week, if not less. Flying back and forth is a day already.”

“Mum is not going to be back in less than a week. I know her.” She sighs a little, grabbing a larger bag of mixed colored apples as they finally reach the produce section, “It’s nieve of you to think otherwise.”

“Bernie is not about to miss something as important as that.”

Charlotte knows better, she’s heard it many times before. Over and over again, with each deployment, that it would be her last. “I want you to go with me, Stepmum.” She finally looks the other woman in the eye, leaning against the side of the cart after dropping a few heads of lettuce into it. “If Mum comes back, that’s fine, but I’d like it if you were there anyway. You can both be in the room if she’s back in time.”

Serena wasn’t expecting that, not having truly gone through all of it with Jason, just bits and pieces that Greta would allow. “Why do you want me there? You could have Cameron if you’d like.”

“No, I want you.” She offers her a subtle smile, “You were already planning on housing us far into this kid’s childhood. You’re going to be there for a long time and you should enjoy it.” Charlotte stands straighter again, “Unless it’s too...I’m sorry, I didn’t take your feelings into consideration. If it’s too much for you-”
“I’d love to, Charlotte.” She starts to smirk.

“And if you’re my Stepmum, you’re this kid’s Gran. So-”

“Wait.” Serena shakes her head a little, “I can’t ask-”

“Serena, you were the one that helped me break free. You. Not anyone else. The men in my family were too chicken shit to even attempt it. You argued with Anders, you brought me round when police scared me off, you welcomed me into your house with no questions asked...you’ve clothed me, fed me-”

“Well, you made the actual food-”

“Cared for me.” Charlotte pauses, knowing she may have been making Serena uncomfortable, but in a good way, “You’ve done, for me, everything a parent should do for their child.” She reaches a hand up, placing it onto Serena’s forearm, “I’d say you rightfully earned the title.”

Serena inhales, her eyes glisten with tears, “I didn’t plan for things to take a turn for the sentimental at the grocer.”

“No one ever does, but...produce does that to people sometimes, I suppose.” The young woman grins, turning away from her to gather cucumbers.

The other woman shakes her head, smiling still, “You know, whether or not you gave me the distinction or the title-”

“You gave it to yourself.” Charlotte gathers fresh green beans, listening to the woman, but occupying herself with what she was doing in front of her.

“That child wouldn’t have known any different.” Serena nods, “Just like Jason’s daughter, Guinevere.” She absently licks her lips, “Thank you, Charlotte.” Her voice low, meaningful. She folds her hands together on the cart, moving it little by little as the young woman continues to put things within it. “Can I tell you something that...I don’t really want your Mum knowing just yet?” Hearing a soft hum of approval, she continues. “I really want to ask Bernie to marry me.”
The young woman smirks to herself, knowing the other woman can’t see her, “Oh?”

“I swore to myself that I wouldn’t marry another living soul...not after everything I experienced with Edward, but...I can’t imagine my life without her.” Serena’s words come from the heart, something she was very used to protecting. “I just...don’t know...what type of ring I should buy, or even if I should buy her a ring.”

“Have you ever seen her rings when she was with my Dad?” Charlotte glances over to her, putting another bag in the cart. Not hearing an answer, she continues, “It was simple. Both were simple. Engagement and wedding ring set. Small diamond, and the band was just a band.” She shrugs, “Really doesn’t matter though. I’m sure she would be happy with whatever you decide to go with.”

The older woman nods, watching Charlotte, “I’ve noticed that you still wear your engagement ring.”

The young woman holds her hand out for a second, looking down to the space on her left hand. She closes her eyes for a moment before reaching the same hand out to grab a couple lemons, “I...” She pauses, focusing on tying the plastic bag closed, “I’ve earned this ring.” The other woman doesn’t say anything, Charlotte continues, “I wouldn’t be surprised if it were just glass, but...it reminds me of what I’ve...gone through. What I’ve overcome.”

Serena listens to her intently, “That you have.”

“And I’ll continue to...because I fear the battle with him hasn’t even started yet.”

Anders Hero watches the pair closely, choosing a crowded aisle as not to be seen. He smirks to himself, he loves her enough. He’ll have his family back together again.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Fearing for her life, Charlotte phones her father for help, only to get an unexpected answer.

Serena does her best to calm her girlfriend's daughter when the pair's safety is threatened.

Charlotte picks up a couple of the bags from the back of Serena’s car, having just returned home from the grocers. She pauses, just standing there. Something doesn’t feel right and she can’t tell exactly what it was. Almost as if she’s being watched. She turns her head as she hears a car revving the engine. The eyes. Eyes she’s seen plenty of times.

“I told you that you didn’t need carry-”

She begins walking toward her quickly as she was coming through the front doorway, “Get in the house.” Her tone urgent as she seems worried.

“I don’t understand.” Serena shakes her head, following the young woman’s direction anyway.

“Barricade the doors.” Charlotte drops the bags on the floor, her hands shaking as she runs to the kitchen to obtain one of the chairs from the breakfast table. “Serena, get the back door.” It’s obvious she’s done this before, especially with the way she places her chair so there was no way he could get in through the front door.

Serena, for some reason or another, just does as she’s told. It isn’t until after, as her hand is grabbed and she pulled upstairs, that she starts to question why. “Charlotte, what the hell is going on?” Into the master bedroom, she watches as the young woman barricades the door yet again, edging whatever she can against it. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“It will be worth it.” She says softly, “Have you phoned the police?”

“Why am I-“
“He’s outside, Serena.” Charlotte places her hand against the underside of her belly when she moves a bit too much. The other woman looks at her, not seeming like she understands, “Anders is outside. He knows where I live...Where we live.”

Serena dials the number for Emergency Services and tells them of the situation, informing them that they have barricaded themselves in the house. She touches the screen to end the call, “Calm yourself.” She motions for the young woman to take a seat on the bed instead of just standing there.

“If he hurts you, I’ll...” Her voice trails off, never thinking before of how this may put this woman in a difficult situation. “See, Mum...She can handle herself. She can more than handle herself, but she isn’t here. I can’t. I can just hide. Hide and wait. You...You didn’t ask for this.” She winces, “He’ll go for you first to teach me a lesson...because some part of him does love me, even if it’s just his cock.”

“Charlotte, sit down.”

“I can’t.”

Serena moves close to the young woman, reaching an arm across her, “We’re going to be fine.” Her tone level, knowing it needs to be. “Police are on their way. They will phone us once they’ve assessed the area.”

“Serena, it doesn’t matter if he isn’t here anymore.” Charlotte turns to face her, “he will come back later because he knows he can.” She bites the inside of her cheek, letting the woman finally guide her to sit on the bed, “Cam thinks my Dad told him.” She gives a quick, nervous laugh, “Can you believe that? My own father.”

“Do you know that for sure?”

“Cameron doesn’t lie to me, Serena. If he believes Dad told him, he has good reason for it.”

“So phone him.” Serena stands in front of her, “Phone your father and see what was said.”

“I haven’t spoken to him in so long.” Charlotte swallows, “I’m afraid what he’s going to tell me...”
“Maybe Marcus didn’t tell him and it’s just coincidence.” The short-haired woman offers, “He also may be able to talk Anders down. He may just understand just how dire the situation is when he sees how...when he sees you, Charlotte.”

The young woman licks her lips, thinking a moment before reaching to her back pocket, removing her mobile. She touches the screen, opening up the video conference application, and touching her father’s name. The phone buzzes and she can feel the anxiety rising within her. He doesn’t answer right away and she isn’t sure he’ll answer at all. Feeling the flutter in her belly, she exhales softly, “Baby’s moving.” She notices Serena’s soft smile.

“Charlotte?” Marcus holds his mobile in front of him, stepping of the treadmill in his personal exorcise area within his home. “Charlotte, is that you?”

Charlotte looks to the mobile, her eyes glistening, “Hello, Dad.”

“Did he find you?” He notices how afraid she seems, “Andy was...He said you were missing.”

“Of course he did.” She shakes her head, knowing her father was the cause of the issue, “I left him. I wasn’t lost or missing, I was...hiding from him.”

Marcus straightens up, “So Cameron was telling the truth.” He runs a hand over the stubble of his jaw, “Damn it.”

“He’s found me once already in the neighborhood...and Mum was there to protect me, but this time...” Charlotte can’t look straight at her father on the small screen of her device, “He followed Serena and I home from the grocer and...” She feels her chin begin to tremble, tears flooding her eyes, “he knows where I am now, Dad. I need to know, were you the one that told him?”

“This is the first time I’m speaking with you in...a year?”

“Cam said...” A tear leaves her eye as she bites the corner of her mouth, lifting her free hand, she runs it over her cheek, “that you figured it out. You’re the only one that would have said anything to him, Dad.”

Marcus shakes his head a little, “Why didn’t you phone in all that time?”
“I wasn’t permitted.” Charlotte isn’t sure if she’s disappointed or angry. Probably the first more so than the second, “Did you tell him where I was?” She asks him straight, finding her voice as she swallows back her fear a bit. “Did you tell him, Dad?”

“Just because my marriage didn’t work, doesn’t mean yours shouldn’t.” He shakes his head, taking a seat on the weight bench in the room. “You wouldn’t need to work a day in your life. He would take care of every single thing you would ever need.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“Did he really hurt you, Char?” The tone of Marcus’ voice is that of a parent who is unbelieving a tall tale told by a child of their school day. He doesn’t believe it, really. He also doesn’t like being stuck between his close friend and his daughter, “Or do you just not like him anymore?”

The anger rises within her a bit more, noticing Serena stand up from the bed in frustration, “You’ve already made up your mind and chosen your side.” She shakes her head slowly, “You didn’t see me for over a year and you never thought to come round to look for me once. Never questioned why he wouldn’t let you see me. Know what he did? He came home and threw it in my face. Told me that you didn’t care and he was completely right. You didn’t care about me.”

“Of course I care about you, Charlotte. Andy said you were unwell and you’d carry on like this.”

“Carry on?” She honestly can’t believe what’s coming out of this man’s mouth.

“Charlotte.” Serena warns her, using her hand to tell her to relax.

“Goodbye, Marcus.” Charlotte touches the screen with her thumb, ending the call before tossing the phone to the end of the bed. She stands from her position on the bed, moving over toward the bedroom door with things pushed in front of it. “Manky coward.” She begins moving the things back, not exactly to where they were previously, just enough to be out of her way.

The other woman watches her closely, “You really need to calm down, Charlotte.” She follows her closely once the door is opened.
“Let him come after me. Let him kill me if that’s what he really wants.” She opens the door, slighted indignation to her voice, “I want an apple. If Anders wants to nick me while I get a bloody apple, let him.” Charlotte flinches again, placing a hand to her lower belly and stopping finally, taking a seat on the top step of the stairs. “I don’t understand him. What was my Dad thinking?”

Serena lowers herself to sit next to the girl, wrapping an arm around her back, “It seems to me that your father doesn’t understand you either.”

Charlotte doesn’t cry, she’s cried too many times about this already. “Before I was with Anders, I could do no wrong with my father. He legitimately didn’t have favorites. He treated Cam and I incredibly well. We weren’t spoiled, but we got whatever we wanted. University paid for the both of us, no debt whatsoever. Looking back, it was impressive.”

“How about we go downstairs and put the groceries away? I anticipate a ring from the police at any moment to tell me that they couldn’t find him.” Her tone gentle, “Not because you didn’t see him, but because he isn’t going to stick around if he knows you saw him.” She rubs her hand affectionately along the young woman’s side, “I think we should go to the courts on this one...I can speak with my-”

“No, it will only make him more aggressive.”

“That’s the point.” Serena can feel the young woman trembling beneath her fingertips, “it will give us a legal foot to stand on in regards to protecting you and our cub. Charlotte, if he breaks a restraining order, he will have a criminal record and serve time in prison.”

Charlotte stares straight ahead, falling silent for a moment before she continues, “Find out the...process before telling them to do anything.” She closes her eyes, biting corner of her mouth, “I don’t want to be signing my own death certificate.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Charlotte finds an ally where she least expects it.

Serena and Charlotte are surprised when they attend an ultrasound appointment with Fleur.

Chapter Notes

20 weeks.

Ric being a softy is positively adorable to me. Hope you guys enjoy this one.

5 days of Christmas is quickly approaching.

Ric Griffin makes his way to AAU, stepping off the elevator car. His briefcase in one hand and a cup carrier in the other. His wool overcoat bundles his frame with a hunter green plaid scarf around his neck. He pushes his way into the consultants’ office after entering through the large double doors. “Good morning, Ms. Wolfe.”

Charlotte doesn’t hear him, her earbuds in her ears as she reads from a rather thick novel. Her anxiety was a bit high since the incident from a few days ago, and she’s run into a bit of a habit when she comes to work with Serena. Feeling a gentle nudge against her knee, she glances up, noticing the man in front of her. She lifts her hand, gently pulling the buds from her ears, “Oh, I’m sorry. Did you say something, Mr. Griffin?”

“I’ve told you before that it’s just Ric.” He places her cup next to her, “Tea for you.”

“You didn’t need to do that.” She smiles gently toward him, lifting her eyebrows when he then holds out a slice of cake to her, “And cake? You spoil me, Ric.”

“Well, I know that you like it.” Ric nods, “You go up to see Fleur shortly, correct?” He moves toward the coat stand, removing his wool blend and hanging it, “Serena has been quite excited about it for most of the week, but you didn’t hear that from me.”
Charlotte nods, slowly unwrapping the slice of bright yellow lemon cake from its cellophane wrapper. “She’s been quite happy about all of this.” She picks the cake up to her mouth, taking a bite out of it and moaning with delight, “I don’t understand how their cake comes out so well every time.” Charlotte shakes her head, “I’m not a baker, but I plan to try while I’m home.”

“I’ve noticed Serena’s lunches. Do you make those?”

“The ones that aren’t take-away.” She tilts her head to the side, “Made you one today as well, actually. Spinach and strawberry salad with toasted walnuts. Poppyseed dressing.” The young woman shrugs, taking another bite of her cake, “If you don’t want it, I’ll eat it. Not making a thing of it. Might be too simple for you. Lacking animal-based protein and all that.”

Ric raises an eyebrow, “I think it sounds absolutely delicious.” When he notices an unbelieving look from her, he continues, “I do. Where did you learn to cook?”

“Sink or swim.” Charlotte nods, “Um...when I got into my last relationship, I was set on being a housewife.” She wasn’t set on it. She wanted to do so much more. “So I had to learn what foods worked with each other. Books mostly, I suppose.”

He’s sorry he asked. He had a feeling it has something to do with that. “Well, you’re a master at your craft...and any man who doesn’t take care of you properly, doesn’t deserve you in the least.”

She smirks to herself, taking another bite of cake as she looks away from the man. He was being far too kind. “Thank you for the cake. It’s...it’s delicious.”

Ric nods to her, opening the door to the rest of the ward. He moves to the nurses’ station, “What do we have?”

“Bed two is waiting on an Neuro consult, fell from a three story building with no broken bones. Imagine that.” Donna explains, “Bed six has just come in and has yet to be spoken to. Obvs taken. Complaining of tightness in the chest and blood in his urine.” She offers him a blue folder. “Sounds right up my alley.”

“Did you buy her another slice of cake? Ric, honestly, you’re going to make the girl diabetic.” Serena begins to shake her head, able to see Charlotte through the window of her office as she nears the nurses’ station, “That is the fourth time this week.”
Ric raises an eyebrow, “Are you accusing me of something, Ms. Campbell?” His tone playful, teasing her a bit. “Besides, she made me lunch today. Spinach and strawberry salad with poppy-seed dressing. I’m honored she even thought of me.”

“You forget the toasted walnuts.” She smirks

“Well, I think it’s sweet, Ric.” Donna nods, pulling herself away to answer the telephone on the desk.

“See? She thinks it’s sweet.” Ric isn’t able to hide his amusement, “I think you’re just nervous about this appointment with Fleur. Which, I don’t understand in the least. The girl is doing just fine. Great in fact.”

“She isn’t though.” Serena shakes her head, mumbling slightly, “but that isn’t anything for us to worry about currently. That is for myself and Fleur to deal with because she and I both have an understanding that Charlotte is going to put others before herself every time and will not take her medication unless I watch her take it.”

“I stand corrected.”

“You didn’t know. Why would you know?” Serena pauses, inhaling deeply, “I have a whole new respect for Berenice Wolfe.” She begins to adjust the sleeves of her lime top, trying to roll them functionally. “Donna, has Neuro come down yet?” Her voice hushed and the nurse shakes her head negatively. Serena nods, “Okay then. I’m taking Charlotte over to Obs and Gynie. Ric, I assume you won’t need me for an hour or so?”

“Good luck, Granny Campbell.” Ric smirks to himself as he looks down to his open folder, receiving a playful hit on the arm from the woman as she walks past. He waits until she reaches her office to lean over to Donna, “Has Bernie arrived yet? It was difficult to guide Serena into a conversation where she mentioned the time and date of the appointment, let me tell you.”

Donna begins to grin, “I haven’t seen her, but that doesn’t mean she hasn’t gone straight upstairs and avoided this floor all together.” She watches as Serena and Charlotte exit the office, making their way toward the elevators, “This is so exciting for all of them.”

“Let them eat cake.” Charlotte smirks a little, standing next to Serena as the woman pushes the
button to the elevator. She adjusts her t-shirt and cardigan after, her belly starting to make itself very known. “Are you just jealous that he doesn’t bring you any?”

“No, I’m absolutely not.” Serena sighs, head tilted back to look at the numbers as they slowly change to show the elevator car is nearing them. She feels as the young woman next to her gently takes her hand, exhaling. “I apologize, I...I’m a little anxious.”

“Everything is going to be fine. I need you to be optimistic right now.” She stares ahead at nothing in particular, “this kid is doing the polka in here. With every tiny movement, it all becomes more and more real.” Charlotte pauses, “and without Mum here...you’re my ride or die.” It garners a soft laugh from the other woman. “So, I need you to be...just be present, I guess.”

“I’ve never been called someone’s ride or die.” Serena continues her subtle smile, amused mostly.

“First time for everything.” Charlotte lets go of Serena’s hand as she steps onto the elevator, knowing the woman is directly behind her. They stand shoulder to shoulder, there was no one else there, “So, final bets?”

“Girl. Your Mum thinks a boy.” Serena states simply, nodding, “You?”

The young woman begins to slowly shake her head, “I, legitimately, have no idea. Not even a guess.” Charlotte folds her arms over her chest, “I read, on one of my apps, that sometimes mothers have dreams about it. Like what the kid will be when they’re grown or whatever, but I’ve had nothing. Not a thing about...about the gender, about anything.” No, just dreams of having her child ripped from her arms and her ex-boyfriend saluting her as he walks off, taking the child forever. Nothing about the gender though. “It’s such an arcane concept anyway...gender. Gender and sexuality are just concepts...as a whole, aren’t they?”

“Oh, don’t go getting philosophical on me.” She smirks, stepping off of the elevator once it opens, “I save those conversations for when I have at least two glasses of shiraz in my system.” Serena lifts her head, coming into contact with her partner, “Bernie.” A grin starts to grow across her face.

“I didn’t think you were going to be here.” Charlotte’s eyes glisten as she bites the corner of her mouth.

Bernie scowls playfully, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” She embraces Serena tightly when the woman moves close to her. Glancing to her daughter over the other woman’s shoulder, “Look at
you, grown so much in just two weeks.” She notices the young woman’s subtle nod, keeping one arm around Serena and placing a hand on her daughter’s upper arm. “No more running off. I’m here now.”

“This is all very lovely, but I have a schedule to uphold.” Fleur tilts her head, watching the family. “And I’d like nothing more than to have you on my table, Wolfe cub.” She pauses, “Well, maybe the delectable Serena, but I’m a realist.”

Charlotte giggles softly to herself, moving away from her mother and Serena to take the consultant’s hand when it’s offered to her. “It’s good to see you again.” She walks closer to her, only noticing then that the woman is so much shorter than her.

“Same to you, how have you been feeling?” The consultant leads her to the room, glancing back and noticing the couple following behind, Bernie’s arm slung comfortably around Serena’s shoulders. “They’ll reach us when they reach us. Do you need help getting your pants off, or can you do it yourself?” Fleur waves her eyebrows.

“Again, depends if you buy me dinner first.” The young woman plays along with the consultant, slowly taking her cardigan off. “Can you maybe...maybe tell them that we’ll do the-”

“You want me to do your internal and measurements first and bring your Mum in after?” Fleur offers, seeing the young woman’s nod. “I’ll talk to them. Don’t worry. Once you get your pants off, lay down and cover up. I’ll be back in just a moment.” She leaves, closing the door behind herself. “Give her a moment.”

Bernie nods toward the woman, “Fleur.” Her tone no-nonsense. “I’m glad Charlotte is able to trust you.”

“Little flirting always goes a long way.” Fleur gives them a wink, “She did want me to ask you all to stay out here during the more...invasive portion. When we’re ready to give her a scan, I’ll retrieve you. Does that sound doable?” Noticing the woman offer their affirmations, she continues, “Is there anything I need to know that she isn’t going to tell me because she has this one for a mother?”

Bernie rolls her eyes, straightening up a bit more, “Thanks a lot.”

“She’s fainted a few times. Nothing we couldn’t handle and she came around almost instantly. She has eaten today, Ric has a habit of buying her slices of lemon cake when he knows she’ll be
here...which has been often as of late.” Serena explains, rubbing her hands together slightly, “She has been forgetting to take her BP meds as well. I don’t understand why.”

“She fainted again after I left?” Bernie furrows her brows slightly, looking over to her partner as she tucks a piece of hair behind her ear.

“Twice more, at least that I am aware of. She says that she’s forgetting to eat, which could very well be the case, but I believe it was to do with her previous situation.” Serena nods, not having told Bernie most of the things the young woman had spoken to her about. Charlotte wanted to open herself up to her and Serena wasn’t about to deny the young woman, or herself, of that connection. Realizing that her girlfriend is still looking to her, “It’s been an interesting two weeks.”

“Okay.” Fleur nods, “Usually I have my staff do obvs and weight, but I promised her that I would be the only one tending to her during these assessments...and I plan to keep my promise to her throughout this.” She glances between the woman, “I’ll return in a mo.” She knocks on the door before entering again and closing it behind her.

“Why didn’t you tell me that she was having a tough time?” Bernie shakes her head a little, folding her arms, “I would have rushed home sooner.”

“Darling-” Serena shakes her head, a little before meeting the other woman’s eyes, “You’re back now. She and I will feel...a bit more comforted...a bit more safe.” She clears her throat, glancing away, “We can talk all about what happened while you were away when we get home. I don’t need you shouting in the hall.”

“That bad?” Raising an eyebrow, Bernie looks ahead at nothing in particular.

“Worse.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Serena does her best to quell her partner's anger.

When Charlotte has a moment of doubt, Bernie helps her understand that she's made the best choice.

“He did what?” Bernie keeps a quiet anger about her. “Why would Marcus inform our daughter’s abuser of her current location?” Pajama slacks and an old military t-shirt covering her frame as they relax in the lounge. Well, Serena relaxes, Bernie sits on the arm of the sofa. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Her...former fiance found and followed us to the grocer, I suppose. I’m not certain when he had found us initially.” Serena takes a sip of her wine as it balances between her fingers, “I’ve...never seen her so terrified. Then she talks to Marcus and got that...kill or be killed gleam in her eye like you get when you’re angry.”

“I have every...everything is telling me to go to his bloody house and scare the daylights out of him.” She folds her arms, finally sliding into the cushion of the chair. “I don’t understand how so much can happen in such a short amount of time.” Bernie shakes her head, “My pregnant daughter was sold out to her abuser by her own father...and then said abuser attacks you and her.” She pauses, glancing over to her girlfriend, “Am I missing something?”

“No.” Serena shakes her head slowly, reaching over to the bottle as it rests on the coffee table. She pours the remainder of the bottle into her glass, realizing only then that she’s consumed the entire thing. “But now is not the time to get all...up in arms. It’s too late and we’re only ruining an overall good day.”

“It was a good day.” A smirk begins to grow across Bernie’s face.

“You were right.”

“I usually am...at least, that’s what I tell myself.” She answers honestly, “A grandson. Can you believe that?”
“I am thrilled.” Serena takes another sip of her glass, “She better know that she’s going to stay here. I won’t take no for an answer.” Her words languid with all the wine she’s consumed, “Her and the boy. Our boy.” Another sip, “I really thought it was a girl.”

“Jason has the girl. We get variety.” Bernie stands, picking up the empty bottle of wine. She walks around to the kitchen and puts the bottle it in the recycle bin before returning to the lounge, “Do you want to head up?” When she notices the woman giving her a suggestive look, she shakes her head negatively, “You’re going to be asleep in a few minutes.” She pulls the throw blanket from the back of the sofa, starting to wrap it around the woman’s lower half.

Serena reaches a hand out, touching her girlfriend’s cheek gently, “I love you, Berenice.”

Bernie leans in, capturing her lips in a tender kiss, able to taste all of the wine that’s coursing through this woman she adores, “I love you too. I’ll get you a glass of water.” She takes the wineglass from her girlfriend’s hand, seeing the tiny amount in the bottom of the glass, which she downs herself.

Bernie stands up, seeing Serena’s already starting to fall asleep, just as she thought she would. She smiles to herself as she makes her way to the kitchen again, cleaning the wine glass, and obtaining her a different one to fill with water. She takes it back to the coffee table, just standing there for a moment. Serena doesn’t drink like this unless Elinor is on her mind. Bernie turns away from her, leaving the television on, but turning off the table lamp on the side table before walking to the stairs.

Standing in the hall after trudging up the stairs, she hears the sounds of sobs coming from her daughter’s room. Bernie closes her eyes a moment, unsure if she should say anything. Moving to the bedroom door, she listens for a moment. Charlotte’s trying to keep it quiet. Bernie closes her eyes, exhausted, but knowing she needs to be there for these women. She knocks gently before pushing the door open, “Are you okay?”

Charlotte lies there, eyes closed, but she isn’t asleep. She has a quick intake of breath, giving herself away. “I’m fine.”

“Doesn’t sound that way to me.” Bernie walks in more, closing the door behind herself. “Serena’s asleep...too much wine.” She smirks a little, amused by it. “Do you want to talk about what’s going on?”

“Not particularly.” She stays turned away from the door, her hands folded and underneath her pillow as she stays on her left side.
“Good.” Bernie ignores her daughter, climbing onto the bed behind her. She gently lies in the space behind her daughter, “Haven’t you a telly in here? We have one in our room.”

Charlotte swallows, knowing her mother is attempting to get her mind off of whatever it was currently on. “It used to be Serena’s mother’s room and Serena was worried that her Mum would break the telly, so...she never put one in here. She bought the mirror when I moved in as well. Her Mum used to break them.”

“Well, we’ll get you one if you’d like one.”

“I read myself to sleep usually.” The young woman rolls onto her back, to her other side to lean against her mother. “Baby always gets most active at night.” The corner of Charlotte’s mouth turns up slightly, “It’s either that or the heartburn...or the cramps. Take your pick.”

Bernie places a reassuring hand on the young woman’s shoulder, “I know, but it will get better.”

Charlotte feels herself growing upset again, “I just...wish I could...I wish I could have Dad around for all this too.” She nods a little, “I think...he really would have been happy if he weren’t so blinded by all of this.” Her chest heaves slightly as she begins her sob again, “You and Serena and Cam...you guys have been so excited, but...I want all of my family and I feel so selfish for that.”

Gently stroking her daughter’s hair, she listens to the young woman, “Would you like me to go have a chat with Marcus?”

The young woman shakes her head negatively a little. “Just stay here.”

“I don’t mean at this very moment, Charlotte.” Bernie listens to her daughter, “we can go over to the house tomorrow.” She pauses, “Or we can show up to Saint James’. Your choice.”

“I don’t like confrontation.” Charlotte answers quietly.

“No confrontation unless he wants there to be.” Bernie glances over to the young woman, even though the room was very dark, she can see her face from the street lights. “We can just talk to him. If we go without warning, he won’t be able to call Anders to let him know that you’re there.” She pauses, “Not that it would make a difference. I wouldn’t let him near you.”
“I just...I really don’t want to go just yet. Give me a little time.” Her voice small, unsure of even herself and her own emotions, “Today was...a lot of things.” Charlotte pauses, just breathing for a moment, “It was overwhelming.”

“Was it Fleur? I can-”

“No, Mum.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, just looking straight ahead mostly. She waits a beat before continuing, “I have a son.”

Bernie begins to smile broadly, “Yes, you do.” She continues to rake her nails along her daughter’s scalp. “Hopefully he doesn’t turn out anything like his Uncle Cameron because you’re in for quite the headache if that’s the case.”

“Anders always wanted a son first. That was his plan. If it was a girl, it wouldn’t be, he’d say. I didn’t understand at the time what that meant. It didn’t matter to me one way or the other.” The young woman moans a little as she adjusts her position to sit up a bit more, “I understand now, after seeing my son moving around and sucking on his thumb, what Anders was talking about.” Charlotte takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly, “and I’m gutted to think... what if? ”

“It isn’t necessary to think of all that though.” Bernie shakes her head, looking to her daughter still, “All of the alternatives, they aren’t going to happen. Something would have gave out. You’re home now...where you belong.”

“I’d be in that house. Behind closed doors.” Charlotte stares straight ahead, thoughts running through her head.

“But you aren’t.” Adjusting her position, Bernie kneels on the bed, in front of her daughter, “You will never be back there again.” She gently places her hand on her daughter’s knee, garnering her attention more, “Do you understand? Never again.”

Placing her hand on her belly, feeling the fetus within her moving a bit, Charlotte meets her mother’s eyes, “I’m just really scared, Mum.” Her voice just above a whisper as another tear escapes her eye. It requires her to use a lot of courage to even mutter the words and she knows her mother is aware of that.

“I know you are.” She moves her hand to her daughter’s cheek, wiping the young woman’s tear
away, “but you don’t need to worry about anything. I’m here, Serena’s here...Cameron and Jason are here sometimes. You will always have someone with you, or with the cub when he makes his arrival, at all times.”

“I’m not afraid of being alone, Mum. I’m afraid...” Charlotte shakes her head, “I don’t know. What my life would be at the moment? Would Anders be taking care of me? Would he have...stopped everything he was doing before because I was finally doing what I was supposed to be?”

Bernie shakes her head slowly, “No, Char, It wouldn’t have stopped.”

Nodding a little, Charlotte looks away from her mother. “I um...” She clears her throat, trying to snap herself out of her teary state of mind. “I’m going to go and make a cake. Do you want to come with me? Make sure I don’t burn the house down?”

“If that’s what you want to do, I’m up for it.” Whatever the young woman wants to do to get her mind off of things, Bernie was going to go for it. “I love cake.” She notices her daughter give her an amused smirk as they get up off of the bed, knowing if this is how she is at twenty weeks, they’re in for a world of adventure for the next twenty.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Bernie pushes Charlotte to speak with her father, against Serena's warnings.

Charlotte gives her parents a scare after a heated conversation with her father.

Chapter Notes

23 weeks.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go and see Marcus.” Serena shakes her head, clad in a thick hunter green jumper and black chino pants. “I think it’s asking for trouble.” She holds a mug of coffee between her hands as she sits in the lounge. “I feel like I’m going to get a bell from you, telling me that you and Charlotte are in lock up for trespassing.”

“Marcus isn’t going to call the police or anyone else.” Bernie pulls on her gray tweed winter coat, glancing toward the stairs for her daughter, “It’s been weeks since the scan...and the cake.”

“It was good cake.”

“It was.” Bernie nods, “Up until nearly three with that one, and I anticipate that she’ll do so again in the near future.”

“You and her polished that off. I had one piece saved for me.” Serena takes another sip of her coffee, leaning back on the sofa, comfortable wool socks pulled over her feet. She smirks, knowing the women and their love of sweets, “No matter. I just really don’t think it’s the best option, Berenice.”

“The most honorable thing to do isn’t always the best thing to do. Marcus needs to know things.”

“I would just like to reinforce that your daughter is in her twenty-third week of pregnancy and Fleur considers it semi-high risk because of the car accident she was in. That’s her term, not mine.” She seems relaxed, apathetic of the situation. “I don’t understand why you can’t just leave well enough alone.”
“Where’s the fun in that?” Bernie removes Charlotte’s jacket from the coat rack, holding it open for her once the young woman gets to the bottom of the stairs. “Is there anything you wanted to take with you?”

“Charlotte, take an apple.” Serena calls out, knowing the young woman and her habits very well at this point. She smirks to herself when Bernie removes one from her own jacket pocket to show her. “If you need me, don’t hesitate to ring me.”

“I won’t.” Charlotte glances into the lounge, a look on her face of anxiousness. She offers a quick smile to the woman before following her mother out to the car. “Did you phone Dad or anything?”

“Did you want me to?” Bernie climbs behind the wheel of the drivers’ side, watching as her daughter secures the seatbelt around herself, “Why didn’t you zipper your jacket? It’s frigid.” She starts the car, pulling out of the space.

“Because it doesn’t zipper anymore.” Charlotte reclines the passenger seat, “too big at this point.” She hears her mother’s soft chuckle, “It isn’t funny. I can only wear stretchy things. Nothing but leggings and long t-shirts or tunics...some cardigans. I’m...so uncomfortable.”

“Oh, Char. I’m so sorry.” She can’t help but have a smile on her face, remembering back to how uncomfortable she was during her pregnancy with Cameron. Charlotte was high risk and required a cesarean section delivery because of being breech, but an overall easier pregnancy as a whole. “Pregnancies don’t last forever. Just a bit longer to go.”

The young woman nods a little, her mother’s focus on the road. Charlotte gently takes her mother’s hand from resting on the center console. She places it on a particular spot toward the middle of her mound, next to her belly button. “I noticed this morning that...you could feel him on the outside, like I’ve been on the inside.” She looks down to her mother’s hand, “He was more active this morning. I think it’s nearly his nap time now so he isn’t...trying too hard.”

Bernie doesn’t know what to say or even if she should say anything. Her eyes glass over ever so slightly as they do each time her daughter has her do this. She chuckles a little to herself, “Feel him go...” Her thumb rubs over the spot gently, almost calming of herself to a degree. “Serena’s going to be jealous, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Charlotte replies softly, “I’ll show her later, when he’s much more awake.” They remain in a comfortable quiet for the rest of the way to Marcus’ house. The house she, somewhat,
grew up in. She hates it here. She did everything she could when she was younger to be out of this house. Joined whatever club was available in school, dated the first guy she could that had a car, even traveled with friends whenever they offered to take her on holiday. As she grew older, she understood why Cameron and her mother ran the first chance they got. She understood why her mother was adamant that she learn how to drive at seventeen, even if she still has her provisional license to this day.

Getting out of the car, Bernie walks around to her daughter’s side, offering a hand to help her from her seat once she opens the passenger door. “Are you okay?”

“As okay as I’ll ever be, Mum.” Charlotte nods, making her way to the door of the home she’s spent many years in. She glances back, seeing her father’s car in the driveway. Her anxiety starts to rise more. She picks her hand up to knock, but the door opens before she’s given the opportunity. She doesn’t say anything, just looking her father in the eye. No tears, only a silent strength about her.

“Charlotte.” Marcus wants to reach out and embrace his daughter, only having spoken to her through video conference over a month prior. “You...” He takes in her form, “You’re pregnant.”

“Observant of you.” She folds her arms across her chest. “I thought you should know.”

Bernie listens to the conversation, leaning her back against the door of her car with a cigarette to her lips. She nods a greeting with a tight, closed mouth smile toward her ex-husband. “Marcus.”

“Well...why don’t you come in? Both of you. I can put on some tea or something.” Marcus offers, still a sense of surprise to his voice. “I insist.”

Charlotte shakes her head a little, “You don’t...” She laughs a little to herself, “Oh my god.” She walks away from him a little bit, only to see her mother put out her cigarette and walk up next to her, “Mum, I don’t know if-”

“It’s okay. Let’s go in, have some tea, you can tell him whatever you feel comfortable telling him. Okay?” Bernie stands there with her daughter for a moment, gently touching the young woman’s upper arm, “You’re doing a great job so far. You’ve gotten the ball rolling. There’s so much that needs to be said and that’s why you asked me to come here. I’m not going anywhere, let’s go and speak with your father.”

Marcus furrows his brow slightly at the display between mother and daughter. Bernie was always a
bit closer with the girl, probably because of the difficult birth and the girl’s few extra days in hospital. Charlotte would always look up to her mother, even saying she wanted to join the military when she was younger. When it all came out about Bernie and why she stayed away for so long, that’s when the outspoken, driven young woman decided she wanted to be a housewife. With his best friend no less.

Bernie walks closer, holding her daughter’s hand, “Tea would be lovely. Thank you.” She enters the house, realizing the place was set up exactly how it was when she left years prior. Bernie smirks to herself, “Set the same way.” She mumbles to herself, glancing over to Charlotte who is sitting on the side.

“So, um...Char, how are you?” Marcus asks nervously, not wanting to upset his only daughter.

“I’m here.” Charlotte watches her father, “So, I could be better.”

“Your friend Anders...abused our daughter within an ounce of her life...and attempted to kill her.” Bernie explains, keeping a calm anger about her. She knows she’s shown this side to her husband before, but not many times. She never really had to. “So, explain to me, why would you give him your daughter’s current location?”

“I didn’t know that...I didn’t understand that it was that bad.” Marcus licks his lips, looking away. Knowing that Bernie knows he’s lying, he continues, “Char, if I had any reason-”

“You acted as if I was lying to get out of a relationship.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, sitting on the edge of the arm of the sofa. “You’ve taken his side over mine on multiple occasions now.”

“Because I’ve known him for over a decade. We’ve been good friends.” The man shakes his head, “He’s always been there with a helping hand if I needed it and when he asked if it would be okay if he could ask you on a date, there was no question to my answer.”

“He was too old for her from the start.” Bernie shakes her head.

“It has nothing to do with age. I usually go for older guys.” Charlotte answers quietly, exhaling slowly as she tries to piece together her thought process. “I don’t trust you, Dad.” She has tears in her eyes as she looks toward the man, “I don’t trust my own father and I should. I really should. One would expect a father to protect his child.”
“Absolutely.” Marcus nods, “and I failed you with that.”

“You more than failed me. You gave me to him on a silver platter. You never came to check on me when I moved in with him...at twenty. Who does that? Who is like, yeah, it’s totally okay to move in with your boyfriend that is nearly twenty years older than you. It’s fine .” Charlotte shakes her head again, pausing a moment when she feels a tight pain at the bottom of her belly, she brings a hand to it, noticing how hard it feels. She flinches, not wanting to draw attention to herself again, especially now since her parents were just speaking with one another like civilized adults for a change. Didn’t happen much when she was a child.

Finally, Bernie glances over to her daughter after a moment, noticing her face, “Char, what’s wrong?” She moves closer, asking again, “What’s wrong?” When the young woman shakes her head a little, she sighs, “I don’t believe you.”

Charlotte slowly inhales and exhales, “What does a contraction feel like?”

“Contraction, no. No need for that.” Marcus shakes his head, moving closer to his daughter as well.

Bernie crouches ever so slightly as to be eye level with her daughter, “It’s a tightening. Like a bad cramp when you’re on your menses.” Her tone gentle, concerned, but wanting to make the young woman comfortable, “Is that what you’re feeling?”

Quickly nodding, Charlotte visibly relaxes a bit, keeping her hand on her ever growing mound, “Yes...it just went away, but yeah.” Her voice soft, unsure if she should be worried.

“It’s probably what they call a Braxton-Hicks, but if you feel another one soon, let me know.” Bernie gently places her hand on the lower portion of her daughter’s back, sighing a little when she feels the young woman lean against her, “Okay...Marcus, we’re going to head on home. I just...hope you understand things differently now.”

Marcus nods a little, his eyes focusing on Charlotte, “Keep me updated? I want to help where I can.” This is all still such a shock to him. He begins to remember now, Cameron told the white lies. Charlotte was never able to. He’s such an idiot. “Let me help you to the car.”

“But don’t touch me.” Charlotte snaps, standing and leaning exclusively against her mother. “I wanted to come here and tell you as a courtesy, that you were going to be a grandfather. That doesn’t mean I want you anywhere near me anytime soon.” She shakes her head, “I don’t trust you.” She says again.
before adding, “and if you even think of saying anything to Anders, I’ll know exactly who betrayed me...again.”

Bernie doesn’t say anything, just keeping an arm around the young woman as they make their way from the house, leaving Marcus standing in the doorway to watch them. “Are you really okay, Charlotte?”

Charlotte stares forward, ignoring the tears that were accumulating in her lower lids out of frustration, “I’m fine.”
Charlotte shares her frustrations to her brother via video conference.

Bernie’s desire to protect her daughter may also be causing her undue stress.

Sharing a special moment together, Serena explains a few things to Charlotte.

Chapter Notes

23 weeks.

Charlotte holds her mobile at a comfortable angle as she lies in bed, her brother’s face on the other end as they have a video conference, “I just want to get up and make dinner. Steak. I’ve marinated it overnight. Nothing too difficult. I’d have Mum or Serena put it into the oven for me anyway. Except, they won’t let me get up.” She pauses, “Well, they will, but they instantly tell me to sit down.”

Cameron snorts, listening to his sister, “I’m sorry. It must be driving you bonkers.”

“You have no idea.” She groans a little as she adjusts her posture.

“How did your meeting with Marcus go?” He has his phone set up as he combs through a file for one of his more baffling patients. Cameron knows he’s missing something, but he isn’t entirely certain what that is. “Was he surprised to see you?”

“Surprised to see that I was up the duff, yes.” Charlotte pushes a piece of hair behind her ear, “I don’t really remember too much of it though.” When the man on the other end seems confused, she continues, “I had a contraction and they started getting on me about it...I didn’t want him near me.” The young woman swallows, “I don’t know if I ever want him near me again.”

“You’ll come around, you always do.” Cameron reads the results of one of the blood tests given, pausing a moment and looking to the screen of his mobile, “Wait a minute, you had a contraction? Just the one?”
“Well, I mean, a few. Mum only knows about the one. They aren’t regular or anything, so.” The young woman stands, just needing to move in any way she can.

“Braxton-Hicks.” He nods, “Still, I’m sure that was worrisome for everyone involved.” Cameron runs a hand through his own hair, “I don’t understand what I’m missing here.” He closes the file up, folding his arms after. “It does explain why they’re not letting you stand very much.”

“Lying down isn’t going to stop them though.” Charlotte places her hand to her hip, “Not to mention, it’s killing my back being down for so long.” She sighs, then starts to smile a little after, “Watch this.” She opens the door to her bedroom, turning the camera to the one on the back of her mobile, carefully making her way to the stairs as to not cause too much noise. Standing at the top of the stairs, she sees her mother standing at the bottom, arms folded. “Hello.”

“Oh, she’s so cross, isn’t she?” Cameron begins to chuckle a bit, able to see his mother. He remembers that look from the many times he had gotten into scraps during primary school. When she was home, they’d call her up. The silence in the car as she would drive him home was the worst. She very rarely yelled at him about that. Maybe it was because she was tired of yelling about it. He’ll never really know.

“There’s a difference between being cross and being worried.” Bernie tilts her head to the side slightly, eyeing her daughter up, “Do you want to come and have a seat down here? Watch some telly?”

“I would like to cook dinner.” Charlotte notices her mother is about to object, she continues, “Everything is prepared...just need to throw the steak under the broiler and roast the aubergine. Should only be a half hour, tops.”

“We can order take-away. I’d rather you not be on your feet that long if we can help it.” Bernie explains, sighing softly.

“Bernie, let her cook if she wants to cook. If she begins having issues, we can finish it up.” Serena offers, having listened to the conversation. She was more emphatic about having her days off or taking more time off here and there to spend with her family. Not just Jason, but this new side of her family. Which meant she was home more often. “It will probably be edible then.”

Charlotte rolls her eyes, “I’m sorry. I’ll...go back to my room.” She turns, disconnecting the video conference without saying goodbye as she trudges back toward her room.
Serena raises an eyebrow, watching her partner. “Are you happy now?”

Bernie places her hands on her hips, turning back to face her partner. “I don’t know what to do with her.” Her tone more quiet, “I feel like...I’m missing something. Like there’s something I could say or do that...makes her realize that sometimes she just needs to stop.”

“What about you? What would make you stop?” Serena turns on the sofa, placing her feet to the floor, “Whatever works for you, may work for her.”

Sighing a little, Bernie shakes her head, “She isn’t going to listen to me.” She makes her way back to the lounge, taking a seat next to her partner.

“Well, it seems you’ve just upset her, Berenice.” Serena offers, folding her hands in front of her as her elbows rest on her knees, “If I were you, I’d take up an apple...or some ice cream, and just listen to her.” Seeing her partner, instead, leaning back to be more relaxed. “Fine, I’ll go. Even though she wants you, I’ll go.” Serena sighs softly, walking to the kitchen to obtain exactly what she said she would, she then makes her way up the stairs, gently knocking on the young woman’s door, “Charlotte.” She doesn’t receive an answer and pushes open the door more

Charlotte sits on the floor, legs folded in a meditative pose with her eyes closed. “Don’t worry. I won’t cook dinner. I’ll just stay here...in this dark...prison-like room.” She answers quietly, finally opening her eyes to not see her mother in front of her, “One Love tastes like banana.”

Serena furrows her brow, not really knowing what the young woman was speaking about, “One Love?”

“The ice cream.” Charlotte is surprised when the woman closes the door behind herself, taking a seat in front of her and opening the pint of ice cream. “What are you doing?”

Holding out a spoon, keeping one to herself, Serena smirks a little, “Have some.”

Charlotte takes the spoon from the woman, pushing it into the soft texture of the frozen ice cream, lifting it to her mouth. “You didn’t answer the question.” She licks the spoon.

“Your Mum is worried about you.” Serena nods, doing the same with her own spoon, “Very worried.”
“She has a funny way of showing it.”

Raising an eyebrow, Serena meets the young woman’s eyes, “I’m serious. You’ve absolutely terrify her. Not only because of the pregnancy, but...in general.” Noticing the confused expression on the young woman’s face, she continues, “She’s afraid of failing you.”

Charlotte sits ever so slightly straighter, “Why would she fear that?”

The other woman shakes her head a little, “You would have to talk to her.”

Licking her lips a little, lifting another bite of ice cream to her mouth, “I don’t know what I’m doing.” Charlotte says quietly, tucking a piece of fallen hair behind her ear. “At all. I read an app, I follow what Fleur tells me, I try to do...do what I can here and there. It’s not enough. I can do so much more, but...I’m stopped.” She swallows, “I’m used to doing everything, but that comes to a full stop with you lot. You and Mum...you want me to just...be still. I hate being still.”

“We don’t want you to feel like you need to tend to us.” Serena answers honestly, “you’re not the housemaid.”

“You both have done so much for me already. I want to do what I can.” Charlotte explains, “if that’s doing the wash, making the bed, making dinner...whatever, that’s what I can do.” She adjusts her position on the floor, placing her hand on her belly as she moves a bit. “Mum wants to put me in a bubble.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” She brings another bite of ice cream to her lips. “Your Braxton-Hicks contractions scared her a great deal, I believe, even if she won’t admit it.” Serena smirks ever so slightly, “We know, as doctors, that you’re right in the time frame for them. However, as your mother, it’s a completely different thing. You want to take care of your child as quickly as possible.” It hits a different cord with her, but she manages to keep it together.

Charlotte notices the woman falling silent, knowing she’s probably thinking of her own daughter. She reaches a hand across to Serena’s and placing it on her abdomen where she felt the fetus pushing around the most, “Give it a second.” She takes another bite of ice cream.

Serena smirks a little, feeling the light push against the palm of her hand, causing her to give a genuine smile. She always dreamed of doing these things with Elinor, but knew she never would and
it pained her. However, Charlotte’s presence filled a void that she missed. She missed being a mother most. “Did he start doing that today?”

The young woman nods, “if I watch my belly long enough, you can see him moving around.” She smirks up toward the woman, “I’m expecting a parasite to burst its way out and scurrying off. Killing me in the process, like in Alien.”

“Well, that’s exactly what happens. Those lucky enough survive.” Serena grins, pulling her hand back finally. “Do you want to come down and fix dinner?” She pauses, “This ice cream is starting to melt a bit.”

“It’s too late at this point. I can make it tomorrow.” Charlotte sighs a little, handing Serena back the spoon when she closes the pint up. The young woman begins to push herself up to stand, “To my credit, I tried to tell Mum earlier that it wouldn’t take long and it wouldn’t, but...I’m not really up for it at this point.”

“Understandable.” Serena nods, standing as well. “Your choice of take-away then?”

“Pizza.” Charlotte begins to smile, always asking for pizza. She didn’t have it during the time away from family and, oddly enough, she missed it most of all. Of course, she probably could have made her own, but where’s the fun in that when you can just phone a shop to bring you one? “Pineapple and ham.”

“Just like your mother.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Not wanting to leave her daughter home alone when she's cleared to work at Holby City Hospital once more, Bernie and Serena devise a plan.

Chapter Notes

Even though last night's outcome was less than ideal. I'm not about to let that stop me (also this was written quite a while ago).

Berena will ALWAYS live on...because we'll be the ones to keep it alive.

Also, this is a short one. Sorry about that. I tried to stretch it, but it didn't want to do that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Spoke with Ms. Tate.” Bernie watches the television as she lounges in the bed she shares with her girlfriend. “I’ve been cleared for locum work.” She raises her brow, “So, I’ll be filling in where I’m needed, but I’ll mostly be on Keller. Something about funding and the amount of electives...I don’t really know. I suppose they expect me to breeze through them.”

“Sasha usually has that on lock-down.” Serena reads her book, “Oh, who am I kidding? Sasha never has anything on lock-down, but I’m sure you’ll do great again. Back to your original post, isn’t it?”

“It is, yes.” She nods, “I’m looking forward to it. I can’t stand having idle hands.” Slowly, Bernie’s head turns to look to her partner, hearing the woman chuckle.

“And I appreciate you for that.” Serena slides the metal bookmark between the pages of the novel, setting on her bedside table. She rolls over a bit, wanting to hold onto her girlfriend. “We haven’t gone out in so long. Like to dinner at a posh restaurant.”

“With good reason though.” Bernie sighs softly, “I don’t want to leave Char alone.”

“Cameron could sit with her.” The other woman offers, “she also has a mobile at her disposal and it wouldn’t be so bad.” Serena offers, thinking a moment, “I could take her to work with me again, but Ric is just going to buy her cake every single day.”
“Did he really?” Bernie smiles slightly.

“Tea and cake every time he was working and I had her there.” Serena thinks for a moment, “What if we just ask her what she would rather do?” She softly places a kiss on her girlfriend’s clothed shoulder, “I think openness is the best thing we could possibly do at this point.”

“Agreed.” She looks toward the television, thinking for a moment. “I don’t remember ever feeling this...worried about my children.” Bernie inhales slowly, and exhales, “which either says a great deal about me and my lack of maternal abilities, or...my overall lack of empathy.”

“That’s not true. You have two fantastic children who both have their heads on straight...for the most part. Cameron is still in the air.” Serena notices the amused expression on her partner’s face, “Don’t think of then, just think of now...and how things are changing for you all.”

Bernie nods a little, “You can say that again.”

“We were thrown into this, but we’re British. We carry on.” Serena says simply, “and who would have thought your pregnant daughter would be the thing to make you stay.”

“I had been thinking about it before that.” Bernie answers quietly, moving her arm to wrap around her partner, “it wasn’t just her, but she helped.” She nods, “When I walked through that door and saw her standing there...in our foyer...I could have cried right along with her. I really could have.” She shakes her head a little, “I missed her so much.”

“Have you told her that?” Serena asks quietly, able to see the change on her partner's face.

Bernie quickly shakes her head, “I don’t cry in front of my children.” Clearing her throat, she continues, “I'm there to be strong for them.”

“You aren't a machine, Berenice. You have emotions. You have a soul.” Serena lifts her head, placing a tender kiss to her girlfriend's lips. “You've let me see that side of you. It's the side I fell in love with.” She smiles softly toward her, picking her hand up to run through the other woman's hair, “Let them see it. It could never end badly if you're just honest about how you feel.”
“Why would you upset me?” Serena runs her lips against her girlfriend’s jaw. When Bernie doesn’t respond, she gives a knowing smile as she slowly sits up more, “I’ll be honest with you, I didn’t know if...I was going to be comfortable with Charlotte staying here. She kept refusing and I thought, maybe she’s not supposed to stay with me and...she’s saying no because she has a different path in life.” She shakes her head a little, “And then...when Fleur did her proper ultrasound while she was in AAU, she realized that I was someone she could trust. Even if she hardly knew me at the time.” The woman pauses, “I was incredibly...humbled. I never stopped to consider how difficult it was for her at the time...to admit she needed help.” Serena pauses, “and how I had to put my worries of upsetting myself aside in order to...save her life.”

“I am so thankful for you.” Bernie reaches a hand out, placing it on Serena’s cheek.

Serena places her hand on the back of Bernie’s as it rests against her own cheek. “I love you.”

“Ditto.”

Chapter End Notes

I, also, don't think that's the last we'll ever see of Bernie Wolfe.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Having a hard time waking her daughter, Bernie fears for the young woman's safety.

Knowing her mother still feels guilty for missing out on her childhood, Charlotte bestows a revelation.

Chapter Notes

25 weeks.

Bernie knocks gently at her daughter’s closed bedroom door before pushing it open, seeing the young woman still in bed. It was unlike her. Usually, the young woman was awake incredibly early at five in the morning, but it was now pushing ten is a cause for concern. Moving around to sit next to her daughter on the edge of the bed, Bernie gently reaches a hand up to stroke her daughter’s hair. “Charlotte.” She calls gently, the young woman’s skin cold and clammy beneath her fingers.

Of course, this increases the worry, “Char.” She asks again, instinctively placing her fingertips to the young woman’s neck to check for pulse. She also counts respirations, noticing them to be rapid, yet shallow. She feels herself beginning to panic, this isn’t what this situation needs at the moment, she tells herself.

Opening her eyes lazily, Charlotte smirks slightly to her mother in front of her, “I’m tired, Mum. Let me sleep.” Her words slurred and her eyes, generally unable to remain open.

“No, come on. I need you to get up. I’ll make you breakfast...or you can have cereal. Which will it be?” Bernie picks up the acrylic cup of water with a lid and built in straw from her daughter’s bedside table, offering it to the young woman, “Here, have something to drink.”

“Mum, no.” The young woman pushes it away weakly.

Bernie sighs out of frustration, “Charlotte, I need you to wake up for me.”
Charlotte rolls to her back, pushing herself up on bed a little, “Baby didn’t fall asleep until around four. I really am just tired, Mum.”

“That isn’t what the rest of your body says. Drink some water. I’m going to get you something to eat.” Bernie curses herself in her head, wishing Serena was home as well so she could just stay here with Char. She feels her daughter holding onto her hand when she tries to stand, “Charlotte, I need to get you something to eat. I believe your blood pressure is too low and we need to get it up.”

“Stay, please.” She motions for her to watch as she opens her nightstand, showing her an apple stored inside, “I put one in here every night to have in the morning...or during the night if I get too hungry.” Charlotte nods, taking a bite of the fruit and closing the small nightstand drawer.

Bernie begrudgingly sits back down on the edge of the bed, placing a gentle hand on her daughter’s knee over top of the quilt. “Smart girl.”

Charlotte smirks a bit, just studying her mother's face, “Look at you...so worried...all wide eyed.”

“Of course I'm worried. You wouldn't wake up.” Bernie answers excitedly, using her hand as she speaks. A part of her fears showing her daughter a softer side of herself. “I was terrified.”

“Of what?” The young woman watches her mother closely, taking a moment to understand why her mother wasn’t responding to her question. Charlotte bites her lip a little, “Mum...I’m sorry.” Her voice small, “I...I didn’t feel different. I just felt tired...that’s a lie, maybe a little dizzy, but overall...” She shrugs.

“You don’t need to apologize...because you didn’t do anything wrong.” Bernie shakes her head slowly, taking a deep breath, “I overreacted.”

“I’m okay,” She says again, “You’re allowed to be worried about me...not that I want you to be, but it’s okay to. I know I worry about you.” Charlotte offers her a kind smile, “always have. Ever since I was young...perched in front of the telly with Cam, hoping I didn’t hear your name among the fallen soldiers. Every single day.” Noticing her mother’s subtle nod, she continues, “When Dad said you were home...but in bad shape...I didn’t know what to feel. Not relief, because you weren’t out of the woods, but...you were home.”

Bernie glances away from her daughter, closing her eyes, “Yeah.”
“And I only know, and understand, now...how selfish I was being then.” Charlotte takes another bite of her apple, eyes damp, but she needs to occupy herself with something else.

“No, you weren’t. I was the selfish one.”

“Stop.” The young woman touches her mother’s arm, “Cam and I both knew...years ago. Dad was the oblivious one...and we just wanted our family together again. Didn’t matter who was unhappy if we were happy. That’s selfish. You deserved to be happy and I’m glad that you were.”

Bernie lifts her head to look her daughter in the eye, offsetting her a sad smile. She stands, pausing a moment before she leans down, pressing a kiss against her daughter’s forehead. “Let’s just...put it behind us. Can we do that?”

“I’d rather not.” When Charlotte notices her mother’s face turn to that of disappointment, she continues, “It made me appreciate you more. It made me...thankful to have you in the first place.” She takes another bite of her apple, chewing for a moment before speaking again, “All the shit Dad had us pull after things came out...sure, but...not everything. It made me who I am.”

“It drove you into the arms of-”

“No, it didn’t. Well,” Charlotte pauses, tilting her head from side to side, “Not really. Not directly.” It did. She wanted to be a housewife to someone in order to show her mother how much she failed at it. However, she wasn’t cut out for it herself and her situation was dire as a whole. “Look, all I know is that you’re going to make an amazing grandmother...and you’ll be able to show your grandson what true love is...with Serena by your side.”

Bernie blushing a bit with her grin, “It’s still so odd for me to think about.”

“You and me both.” Charlotte takes another bite of her apple, “fifteen more weeks...about.”

“Well, he can take his time.” Bernie hears her daughter hum a soft chortle, “Not too much time like you did, but enough.” She places her hands on her hips, “I still have scars from you.”

“And you don’t let me forget it.” The young woman allows her mother to take her wrist again, knowing she’ll want to check her pulse. She sighs, rolling her eyes a little.
“We need to talk about when I start back at Holby.” Bernie glances to the alarm clock on the side table as she speaks. “I don’t feel comfortable leaving you home...all alone. With your pregnancy being somewhat high risk because of your blood pressure and-”

“Because of Anders.” Charlotte tilts her head to the side, shrugging a little. “You’re allowed to say the real reason.” She offers her mother a reassuring half-smile, “It doesn’t bother me knowing that he’s an issue. I know he is.” She nods a little, “I don’t know what I could possibly do differently either.”

“Let me worry about it.” Bernie raises an eyebrow, “Do you trust me?”

“You’re the soldier. Not me.” Charlotte watches her mother intently, “You’re the one who knows thirteen ways to kill someone with their bare hands. Not me.”

“You didn’t answer the question.” Bernie lets her daughter’s wrist go, folding her arms comfortably after.

“I trust you with my life, Mum.” The woman should have known that. Charlotte sighs, not understanding why it was such a foreign concept for her mother to think she’d trust her. There was never any doubt for Charlotte. She’d trust her mother to protect her and her son without question. She just wishes her mother understood that.

“Okay.” Bernie stares straight ahead, attempting to think of a way to keep her safe, “Are you opposed to going to work with Serena or myself?” She leans back a little, “I can talk to Abigail and see if there’s-”

“Mum, I can’t sit at your work all the day long. You’d worry any time I went to the loo.” Charlotte watches her mother, “and what...I don’t leave your offices throughout the entire day? For the next fifteen weeks or so?” She finishes her apple, placing the core on her nightstand, “I mean, if you think it’s the best option, I will do it, but...I’m just thinking of you as well as me.”

“What did you do when I was in Nairobi and you were just with Serena?” Bernie knows the answer, “I don’t know what else we could possibly do aside from hiring you a bodyguard.”

“I don’t want a bodyguard.” Charlotte folds her arms, “Then I’ll have to sing and do a whole film with him-”
“Char, I’m being serious.” Bernie corrects, a bit of mirth in her voice regardless.

“Me too, I’m not prepared to be a vocal powerhouse, Mum.” The young woman takes a light tone of voice while interacting with her mother, “Listen, I’ll go to the hospital with you and Serena, but don’t expect me to stay cooped up in your offices. I’m going to roam about.” She tilts her head to the side, placing a hand on her suddenly active midsection. Charlotte raises an eyebrow to her mother, “Could you agree with that?”

“If you keep your mobile on you, absolutely. I can agree with that.” Bernie nods ever so slowly, “As long as you don’t attempt to hide if you aren’t feeling well and you must not get in the way...or attempt to help. You aren’t being paid.”

“I’ll do what I want.” Charlotte teases her mother, reaching over to her nightstand and holding the glass of water in her hand, taking a sip. “I jest, but...I promise you that I take this more seriously than you do.” She says quietly, “I think about what I’d do if he ever became a problem again...would I fight or would I fold...” The young woman shrugs, placing the glass on the nightstand again, “Honestly, I have no idea.”

“I think you would know what to do.” Bernie places a cautious hand on her daughter’s abdomen, feeling the babe moving about inside. It causes her to smirk a little, “You are staying in place for as long as we can make you, sir.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Charlotte helps AAU get into the Christmas spirit.

Cameron informs Serena of the return of an old family foe.

Serena, after being told to keep an eye on Charlotte, immediately loses track of her.

Chapter Notes

28 weeks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlotte slowly adjusts the garland around the edge of the nurses’ station of the AAU, securing it with the clips that were provided to her. She laughs a little to herself, adjusting the small bluetooth speaker. The holiday music isn’t terribly loud, but it amuses her. She can feel Serena’s eyes on her, able to see the woman fold her arms from the corner of her eye. “I was paid to do this.” Charlotte quickly says in her own defense. “And I’m not getting in anyone’s way. Promise.” She finally stands up straight, smiling a little.

“I only went into theater a couple of hours ago. Once I take my leave from the operating room, I walk into Santa’s bloody workshop.” Serena tilts her head to the side, an unimpressed expression filling her face, “Who paid you and how do you know that you aren’t in the way?”

“She’s perfectly fine, Ms. Campbell.” Donna shakes her head a little, inputting information at the computer.

“You love Christmas. You won’t admit it, but I’ve seen those holiday jumpers in your bedroom cupboard.” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, “Also, it’s Guinevere’s first Christmas. I know you’ve gone totally overboard with her gifts.” She makes eye contact with the woman, “You’re allowed to like it.”

Serena does love the holidays, but each event only serves as reminders that they would lack her daughter’s presence every single time, for the rest of time. She nods a little, a hint of sadness behind her slight smile. “Who paid you, Charlotte?”
“Oh, where’s the fun in revealing that?” The young woman walks back over to the plastic container that was previously holding the decorations, finally closing it up and lifting the empty thing from the floor. “Do we have decorations at home? Maybe in your attic or something?” She carries it toward the empty, unused office, the place where she’s been staying for the past few weeks while spending time in AAU.

“It was Ric.” Serena begins nodding slowly, “I should have known.”

Charlotte taps the side of her nose with her index finger, signaling that the woman was correct in her guess, “Well, I suppose he figured that he would have the staff doing their actual jobs instead of unnecessarily decorating when I am more than available.”

“And you’re in your third trimester. You need to take it easy.” Serena reaches forward, gently touching the young woman’s forearm when she notices Charlotte’s expression downturn a little. “Fish and chips night. I’ll have Jason bring down the decorations from the attic, if that’s what you really want to do.”

“When I was a kid, if Mum wasn’t home...Dad would refuse to decorate. Bad luck he’d say. I mean, we’d still get gifts and all that, but...no tree, no decorations, no Christmas jumpers. He may have just been being lazy, but we would rather not take the chance.” She absently licks her lips, her hand adjusting her burgundy colored, collared blouse, “So...when I moved out, believe it or not, Anders made sure I had all the decorations I wanted...so that I could decorate the house and have my own Christmas. My Christmas on my terms.”

“I understand.” Serena nods, “It’s uh...It’s still a bit difficult for me, so I apologize.”

“We can have a small tree if you don’t want a big one. We don’t need to have stockings if you don’t want to have them.” Charlotte offers, her smile only partial. “Upsetting you is the last thing I want, but...I think it might help you too. We can decorate together if you want.” She’s been trying to reach out to this woman to whom she owed so much in such a short amount of time. If it weren’t for Serena Campbell taking an interest in her, she’d be back with Anders, still attempting to survive...if he hadn’t kill her already.

“You’re right.” Serena clears her throat, looking away from the young woman, “You’re absolutely correct. Guinevere deserves a proper Christmas.”

“Exactly.” The young woman flashes her a soft smirk, “And next year, you’ll have another to show off for.”
Serena nods quickly, turning to make her way back to the door to lead back to the rest of the department, “Don’t forget your appointment today.”

Charlotte nods, “Deprive you of a new picture? I wouldn’t dare.”

The consultant returns to the desk, back to the rest of the unit. “That girl is going to be the death of me.” She mumbles loud enough for the nurse in front of her to hear.

“Oh, relax. Just a bit of decoration. Plus, she’s done a great job.” Donna offers a smile, noticing an underlying look on her boss’ face. “Are you okay with it all?” She pauses, “I mean-”

“I’m fine, Donna.” Serena quickly covers, picking up a blue folder from the top of the nurses’ station desk.

“Actually, Ms. Campbell, before you take that. There’s been a request from Darwin for a consult.” Donna tilts her head to the side, “I’d have thought they were familiar with this sort of thing, but Darwin said it’s one of your patients.” She glances down with the telephone rings, “AAU.” She answers, her brows coming together in either concern or confusion...possibly a mixture of both, Serena isn’t sure. Donna puts her hand up for the consultant in front of her to wait a moment, “I will let her know.”

“What’s-”

“That was Dr. Dunn on Darwin. He said to stay down here and he will speak to you later.” Donna shrugs, “Also asks that you not tell his mother about this and for you to keep Charlotte here.” When the consultant isn’t sure what it could be, “I’ve no idea.”

“Well, that only makes me want to take a trip to Darwin even more.” Serena leans an elbow against the desktop.

“He sounded pretty-”

“I’m going to my office to give him a ring, see what the hell is going on around here.” Serena sighs, finally stepping away from the desk as she makes her way toward her office, taking one last glance
toward the secondary office, noticing Charlotte taking a seat, finally. She exhales, closing her office door behind herself. Moving over to her desk, she uses her mobile to dial Cameron directly.

“When I said I would speak with you later, I didn’t mean minutes later.” Cameron sighs, standing at the nurses’ station of the Darwin ward. He gives a slight nod toward Frieda as he steps away, down a hall. Not one place in particular, just away from the main hub of the unit.

“If you were phoning me, it would be important.” Serena raises an eyebrow. “What’s going on, Cameron?”

Cam sighs heavily, “Anders is here.”

“What?”

“Anders Hero is in my unit, taking up a bed. I’ve been assigned to his case, but...he’s here. Make sure Charlotte doesn’t leave your sight.” He says quietly, “I don’t want to get Mum worried about it...or Char. They don’t need to know really.”

Serena begins to shake her head slowly, “Cameron, I don’t like keeping secrets from anyone. Especially about something so serious.”

“Which is why I said I would speak to you about this later.” Cameron shakes his head, “I was going to take care of things before even saying anything to you, really.” He glances around slightly, keeping vigilant of his surroundings. “You wouldn’t be lying to either one of them, just withholding information.”

She absently strokes the hair at her own temples with her nails, “Just as bad, Dr. Dunn.” A nervous tick of sorts and she usually isn’t even aware she’s even doing it.

“Just keep her on AAU.”

“Well, I cannot do that. She has an appointment with Fleur Fanshawe on Maternity in an hour’s time. If I were to reschedule that, she would know that something is going on.” Serena sighs softly, “If I go with her, she would know just the same.”
“I don’t think she would.” Cameron shakes his head slowly, “We need to figure something out here, Serena.”

Serena doesn’t respond, the talk with a legal professional a virtual non-starter. If Anders Hero didn’t actually threaten to attack anyone, there wasn’t really anything that could be done. Especially since Charlotte was so hesitant to do anything previously. “I’ll talk to your sister.” She pauses, “I’ll request going up with her.” That was all that was needed to be said as she touched the screen of her mobile to disconnect the call. She sighs a little to herself, standing and returning the hall, glancing over to the additional office, only to see it empty. “Donna, how long ago did Charlotte step out?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t notice.” Donna shakes her head, “Had a call about a transfer from ED. Blunt force trauma with internal bleeding. I was making sure we had the trauma space ready.” She motions to the area of the secluded room, knowing that’s where they would handle the patient.

“She’s just忙其他事。” Donna shakes her head, “Had a call about a transfer from ED. Blunt force trauma with internal bleeding. I was making sure we had the trauma space ready.” She motions to the area of the secluded room, knowing that’s where they would handle the patient.

“Get Ric or Dr. Duval for that one. I’ve a bit of a...family emergency on my hands.” Serena says quietly, still holding her mobile in her hand, she touches the screen, scrolling to Charlotte’s name. She touches it with her thumb, bringing the device to her ear, “Come on, answer. Please, answer.” When it goes to voicemail, she frantically says, ‘Charlotte, it’s Serena. When you receive this, please give me a bell in return. I desperately need to hear from you.” She accidentally touches the screen with her cheek, stopping herself from putting an I love you on the end of her message, thankfully. However, it does nothing for her anxiety. She touches the button on the elevator, leading to the Maternity ward. Please, just be early for your appointment.

Chapter End Notes

This weekend starts the many chapter extravaganza.
Expect a new chapter every day starting on Saturday (with 2 on Christmas), leading up to Boxing Day (which...has some game changing stuff happening in it).
How the hell is Christmas already next week?
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

After being placed in charge of Anders Hero's care, Cameron does his best not to kill the man who tortured his sister.

Jac Naylor lays down the law when it comes to her young F2.

Anders Hero opens his eyes, noticing the familiar young man scowling toward him from the end of his hospital bed. “Cameron...it’s good to see you.” He sounds cordial, tired. For the first time ever in his life, he looks and sounds his age, if not older. His face more gaunt, his skin not nearly as sunkissed as it had been previously.

“Of all the hospitals, you show up to this one.” Cameron has his arms folded, not about to take any sort of nonsense from this man in any way, ready to call Security at the drop of a hat. “You could have gone to any private hospital you wanted, but you came to this one...the one you know damn well that my family works throughout.”

“Look, it was the closest one.” He begins to shake his head slowly, “I was having a heart attack.”

The young man doesn’t acknowledge the man’s explanation, not believing it really. “Eight blockages...should have just done yourself a favor and died instead.”

“Dr. Dunn, that will be enough.” Jac Naylor doesn’t scowl, having been standing just behind the F2, a feeling there was something between the two men, but not invested enough to ask about it for the moment. “Mr. Hero, as you know, we’re going to need to do multiple bypasses. Is there anyone we can call for you?”

“Nah.” Anders shakes his head slowly, “Messed that one up beyond repair.” He says quietly, “I’m a changed man, Cameron. I swear it.”

Jac finds herself refraining from rolling her eyes, “Okay, well, that only means a longer time in hospital as you recover. Not even a parent or sibling? Doesn’t necessarily need to be a partner.”

“I’ve already told you no, Ms. Naylor. I’ll be sailing this ship alone.” The older man watches the
surgeon, “Really though, it doesn’t much matter. I’ve brain cancer. Found out a couple weeks ago. Too advanced to operate or make a difference. I’m just biding my time...making amends where I can.”

“Making amends? Are you bloody kidding me?” Cameron glares at this point.

“Dr. Dunn, my office.” She watches as the young doctor storms off. “I apologize, Mr. Hero-”

“No, he has his reasons...and they’re all founded.” Anders offers a soft, sad smile. “All I’m saying, Ms. Naylor, is that I shouldn’t have priority in your unit today, or any day. Take other cases first. Got it?”

“I’ll take my cases however I see fit.” Jac gives him an unbothered look, sliding his patient log into the basket at the foot of his bed. “Get some rest for the time being.” She turns away from him, retreating to her office to see Cameron Dunn pacing in front of her desk. “What the hell was that just then?” She slams the door closed.

“That’s the man that tried to kill my sister, Ms. Naylor.” Cameron explains quietly, “I shouldn’t be on his case because there’s no way I could possibly be impartial to him.” He folds his arms, finally taking a seat in one of the chairs against the wall, “I want him to die in oncoming traffic...like he attempted with my sister. I can only imagine how terrified she was at that point, I want him to feel that too.”

She never would have guessed, nodding slowly, “I understand your reservations, however-”

“Ms. Naylor-”

“However, I think it would serve as greater poetic justice if he owed you his life...at least an extension of his life.” Jac watches him, edging herself against the front of her desk, “He’s going to die alone, in a puddle of his own waste. That is his future. Saving him today will ensure that future for him. He won’t die from a heart condition, he’ll die of something taking over his brain that he has no control over and cannot stop. I think that’s far more terrifying. Knowing the end is quickly approaching and knowing there’s no way to stop it.” The quiet in the room is interrupted by a knocking at her door, “Enter.”

Frieda Petrenko pokes her head in, “I’m sorry to interrupt-”
“Right, can this wait?” Jac slowly glances toward the other woman’s direction.

“Mr. Hero is having a stroke.” She sighs, leading the way as the consultant and F2 are quick to follow her. “I’ve also asked for a Neuro consult. Something does not rub me the right way with this guy. Guy Self should be down in a bit.”

“Right call.” Jac moves close to the man’s bed, noticing the slight droop of the left side of his face. “Alteplase, have you given-”

“I was not born yesterday.” Petrenko scowls, motioning to his intravenous drip with a wave of her hand, “I do think we should send him down for another CT with contrast so we can have a better idea of what we’re working with here. I can schedule that for you.” She notices the consultant’s subtle nod before walking off again.

“Please, don’t make me do this.” Cameron whispers toward the consultant.

“Be brave.” Jac answers, placing her hands against her hips, “Being brave is being afraid of what we need to do, but doing it anyway.” Her head slowly turns to face him, “I know you don’t want to do this, but all of your examples just seem to me like more reasons you should. Unless...you think it’s too hard-”

“No, I can do this with my eyes closed.” Cameron’s voice reflects subtle indignation as he stands ever so slightly straighter.

“Then do it with your eyes closed.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Realizing how inconsiderate she was being, Charlotte apologizes to Serena.

Serena accidentally sends out a group text meant only for Cameron.

Bernie reveals her concern for Serena with Dom Copeland during one of their roof chats.

Chapter Notes

Roof talks. I've missed them.

28 weeks still.

Serena steps off the elevator car, glancing around the ward, she moves to the common waiting area, hoping she would see her near stepdaughter sitting there waiting. She exhales a sigh of relief when she sees the young woman with her eyes glued to her tablet computer.

Charlotte lifts her head at the sound, a smirk growing across her face, “You okay?” She adjusts her position in the seat, the baby uncomfortably stretching within her womb. “Care to sit?”

She thinks for a moment, attempting to give a reason for rushing up here like she did, “I feel bad about before.” Serena lowers herself into the chair next to the young woman. “I shouldn’t have gone all stern on you like I did. It’s just...the holidays are a rough time for me.”

“I know.” The young woman nods, taking the other woman’s hand and offering a small, reassuring smile. “I wanted to apologize too. I just...wasn’t thinking about how...Christmas would make you feel.” Her eyes more damp from before, she sucks her tongue against her cheek, creating a quick sound, “Sodding hormones.” Charlotte whispers to herself.

“You were correct though.” Serena laces her fingers between the younger woman’s, “Elinor would want to make this the best it possibly can be for Guinevere.” She smirks at the thought of her daughter being a decent aunt to the babe, “She would have loved to dress her up and make her into such a little diva.”
“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get to know her better.”

“I don’t know if you would have gotten along.” Serena shrugs, “One Christmas doesn’t do much.”

“Does enough though. We have pictures...ones that are able to remind me of when I was thin.” Charlotte rolls her eyes a little, hearing the other woman chortle softly. She places her hand to her middle when she feels the babe stretch again, running her fingers against the thin fabric of her blouse, “His whole foot. I reckon he believes it funny...causing me pain like he does.”

“Children are good for that.” Serena reaches a hand over, cautiously touching the spot Charlotte was speaking of, “Be kind to Mummy, won’t you, little one?” Her thumb softly rubs over the baby’s foot, the corner of her mouth turning up in a kind smirk. Serena places her hand back at her side, leaning back in her seat a little, “Would you mind it if I were to tag along for your appointment?”

“Of course not.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, having attended the last few alone due to scheduling conflicts. “I’ve actually been meaning to ask you, I’m allowed up to three people in the room when I give birth. Mum is, obviously, a given. I was hoping that, maybe, you would consider joining me as well.” She doesn’t hear the woman say anything at first, continuing, “If you aren’t comfortable with it, you aren’t going to hurt my feelings if you decide to decline. The last thing I would want is to—”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Serena glances over toward her, “This child may not be my grandchild, biologically...I’ll never get to have that, but...he will know no different. Just like Guinevere.” She leans over, hugging the young woman carefully. Letting her go after a moment and returning to a more comfortable position in her seat, Serena continues, “I keep thinking that...about Elinor having a child. Bit selfish of me, really. Truth is, I never once expected her to ever want to be pregnant when she was alive. I don’t think she ever saw it in her cards.”

“Career girl.” Charlotte is quite surprised that Serena is opening up to her like this. She remembers back to not recognizing her at first when she was in AAU after the accident, but it seems so long ago already even though it was only a few months. “You’ll have to tell him all about his brilliant Aunt Elinor as he grows up.”

“Try and stop me.” She smirks, glancing over toward the nurse when Charlotte’s name is called. Serena stands, then helps the younger woman from her seat. Glancing down to her mobile, Serena types out a quick message to Cameron. I have Char. In appt with her now. Totally safe.

Bernie reaches into her pocket, fetching her mobile when she feels it vibrate with a text message. She furrows her brow upon reading it, quickly responding, Was she not safe?
“Shit.” Serena audibly whispers to herself, quickly realizing she sent that in the family group text instead of solely to Cameron. Receiving a glance from Charlotte as a nurse performs her vitals before Fleur makes an appearance, “Sorry.” She’s glad the young woman was ignoring her device during this appointment. *All is fine. Cam was worried and phoned AAU. Everything is fine.*

“Well, I don’t believe that in the slightest.” Bernie shakes her head, sitting on the rooftop, just needing a moment away from her unit and overall hustle and bustle of the hospital. If there’s one thing she missed about Holby City besides her girlfriend, it was this roof.

“Talking to yourself, are we?” Dominic Copeland smirks a little as he walks toward her, taking a seat not far from the woman. “First sign of madness.”

“And all this time, I thought it was talking to you.”

“Touche.” Dom smirks, truly amused. “We haven’t been up here in so long together.” He leans his head back, letting the sun beat onto his face as he closes his eyes, “You know, I’ve been tempted to move to St. James, but I haven’t because their roof doesn’t receive sun like Holby’s.”

“It’s quite comforting.” Bernie leans her head back as well, mimicking his expression. “You’re a married man now, though. It would probably be more tough if you moved to another hospital. At least, this way, you lot can see one another all the time.”

“Very true.” He nods slowly, “You’re going through a bit of a change yourself, aren’t you, Gran?” Dom grins to himself, “I’ve seen your daughter going into your office. I tried to stop her the first time, because I had never met her previously, but she just looked at me and I decided not to argue. She could have been a complete stranger, but that look nearly cost me my life.”

“*A look to sink a thousand ships* . That’s what my ex-husband used to call it.”

“Well, it’s a very accurate description.” Dom nods, squinting his eye open to look over toward her, “You look far too young to be a grandmother.”

“Afraid not...and I plan to revel in it.” Bernie beams, folding her arms around herself, “Little boy, by the way. Cameron is thrilled that he and Jason won’t be the only males at family functions.” She amuses herself a bit, “I was secretly hoping for a girl just to spite him, but Char’s going to follow in my footsteps with her first born.”
“How is Serena taking it?”

Bernie shrugs a little, “She’s happy for her, of course, but...December is a tough month for her...for obvious reasons. It’s only the second Christmas without Elinor.” She’s met with silence, “Hopefully Jason’s daughter gives her a bit more...hope.”

Dom nods slowly, thinking about his first year with Lofty as his husband, “We could all use some hope for Christmas.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Christmas Eve.

Charlotte gets the ball rolling for her roommates with a very important early gift.

Cameron phones Serena, asking a question he should already know the answer to.

Chapter Notes

Y’all better get to sleep early for Santa tonight.

31 weeks.

“I told Charlotte that I would carry down her gifts once she finished wrapping them.” Bernie notices her girlfriend sitting on the sofa, in front of the lighted tree. A despondent, lost look about Serena’s face. She sighs softly, wishing she could make the woman feel better. “Serena.”

“I didn’t put up a tree last year.” Serena bites the corner of her mouth, just staring. Spiced mulled wine in a mug in her hand. “I didn’t...realize just how difficult this would be when I agreed to it.” She swallows hard, “Charlotte did a great job.” Her chin begins to tremble, eyes growing a bit wet, “Even put all of Elinor’s ornaments in front...like she knew they were for her.”

“If this is too hard, Serena-”

“No...no, Guinevere deserves a proper first Christmas. Then Charlotte’s son after that.” Serena answers surely, finally glancing over toward her girlfriend, “There’s even a,” She rises from her comfortable seat, moving over to the tree to place her fingers around a delicate glass ornament of an abstract pink bundled infant, “special one for Guinevere. Charlotte’s incredibly thoughtful.”

Bernie nods slowly, “Never understood where she got it from. She’s always loved Christmas though. Ever since she was small, she’d go over the top when I was home. Wearing Christmas jumpers, felt antler headbands. Going absolutely mad for Christmas.”

Serena smiles to herself a little, remembering back to the conversation she had with the young
woman, and having a feeling Bernie never really knew the truth of it. “I used to be like that too.” She feels her girlfriend wrap an arm around her finally as they continue to look at the various simple, yet beautiful decorations of the Christmas tree.

Charlotte stands in the doorway, small box in hand as she watches them. She doesn’t know how she’s gotten so lucky to have two parents that properly love her more than anything without any expectations. Finally, she knocks on the doorframe, garnering their attention, “I apologize for the disruption.”

“I told you to just text me when you were ready to bring gifts down-” Bernie raises a concerned eyebrow, keeping an arm around her partner.

“No, I’m not finished yet.” Charlotte snarls her lip a bit, disappointed with her own progress. “Didn’t realize just how difficult it would be with a big belly in the way.” She shakes her head a little, “No matter. I wanted to give you both this as a little...Christmas Eve treat.”

“You’ve already made this spiced wine.” Serena motions with her empty mug, the cinnamon stick swirling around the ceramic rim, “That’s gift enough, seeing as how you aren’t able to actually have any.”

“Fleur said I’d be okay to have one glass...I’m contemplating it.” Charlotte smirks a little, placing the smallish box in her mother’s outstretched hand before backing away slowly, “Two things in there. Take your time opening it...I’ve got to get back upstairs. Those gifts aren’t about to wrap themselves.” She makes her exit, knowing it was going to make them cry and she couldn’t bare that for the moment.

“You do the honors.” Bernie offers the smallish box to her partner, watching as she opens it with uncertainty.

Serena pulls the green velvet ribbon from its embrace, glad there was no extra tape keeping it closed. Tears instantly spring to her eyes, seeing an ornament with the children making faces from one of Bernie’s serious picture then silly picture moments. She chortles sadly to herself, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this one.”

Bernie holds her girlfriend a bit tighter, “I want this for the wall.” Amusing herself, she begins pointing, “Look at Jason even giving you bunny ears.” The ornament says Family on the bottom and it’s a moment even Elinor seemed to enjoy. She left shortly after the photo was taken, not able to deal with the affection between her mother and Bernie. Elinor didn’t say anything on her departure, but she didn’t really need to. Her actions and facial expressions said enough.
“It’s so perfect.” Serena nods, sniffling back her emotions between soft chortles. She hands it to Bernie watching as her girlfriend hangs it carefully onto the branch of the artificial tree. She glances down to the small box again, smirking as she sees another ornament, a glass snowflake with a picture of she and Bernie, foreheads pressed together, large smiles adorning their faces, Wolfe 2018 written at the bottom. Serena grins a bit more, amused. Maybe this was the window Charlotte was offering for her to ask Bernie. Gently looping the hanging string around the branch, she tilts her head over to her girlfriend, “How about it?”

“It would be Wolfe-McKinnie, wouldn’t it?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, “I mean, unless you’d really rather keep Edward’s last name.”

“Wolfe would be best.” Serena shakes her head a little, “I shed the McKinnie moniker many moons ago.” She slowly glances over to meet her partner’s eyes, “What say you?” Her eyes glisten with the twinkling fairy lights of the Christmas tree. “Do you want to get married and make me a Wolfe?”

“Yeah.” Bernie begins to nod slowly, “I have a ring for you and everything. I suppose this is Charlotte’s way of putting a fire under me-”

“Myself as well...I have one for you.” Serena turns to face her girlfriend more, leaning forward and capturing her partner’s lips tenderly. “It was a fire for the both of us. She knew of my plans as well.” Serena tosses the empty box onto the sofa, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend in after, their kiss deepening. She presses her forehead to Bernie’s after, “I love you so much.”

“Ditto.” Bernie mumbles, closing her eyes as she beams. She’s never been happier than she is in this very moment. Maybe when her children were born, but even that’s questionable. Bernie embraces her partner tightly, “Serena Wolfe...has a nice ring to it.”

“That it does.” Serena hears her mobile begin to vibrate against the glass surface of the coffee table. “I’d better get that.”

“Cameron?” The blonde raises an eyebrow, seeing a picture of her son’s face show up on the screen of her girlfriend’s mobile.

“Probably about a Christmas gift. You know men.” Serena winks toward her girlfriend moving away from her to answer the device. She presses the receiver portion against her ear, “Yes, Cameron.”
“Listen,” Cameron sighs, glancing toward the room with the patient he hates treating, “Hero wants to speak with Charlotte.” He pauses, “If we put them both on speaker-”

“Are you mad?”

“Hear me out.” The young man attempts again, pacing within the confines of the festively decorated staff locker room. “He’s super close to dying. I can’t help except believe this could be beneficial for the both of them.”

Serena begins to shake her head, “We need to make your mother aware...and actually ask Charlotte what she feels about it.” She notices Bernie paying more attention to the conversation that she can only hear half the information of. “Your mother is great with this type of thing. If it’s solely up to me, it’s an immediate no, Cam.”

Cameron sighs heavily, really not wanting to bring his mother into this. “Fine, whatever.” He runs a hand against the beard stubble of his jaw, knowing his mother wasn’t going to like this in the slightest.

Giving her new fiance a sideways glance, Serena touches the screen of her mobile, turning on the speaker function. “Go ahead, Dr. Dunn.”

Bernie can hear the hesitation in her son’s groan, “Cameron, whatever it is, I’m not going to be angry with you. It’s Christmas...I need to conserve the energy.” She finds herself smirking when she notices Serena blush and stifle a laugh. “Go on.”

Cameron takes a seat on one of the benches, staring through the window, he recounts the story about Anders Hero’s admittance and the discovery of his various ailments, including his terminal brain cancer. “Upon consultation with Guy Self, he came to the conclusion that most of his actions and outbursts are because of the tumor in his brain.”

Bernie licks her lips, absently glancing toward the ceiling in thought, “Where are you going with all of this, Cameron?”

“He uh...I don’t know how much longer he’s going to last, but...he’d really like to talk to Char. Doesn’t need to be alone, just...he said he has something to give her.” Cameron begins to shake his head to himself, “I want him to burn, but...we should at least ask her if she would speak with him.”
Bernie shakes her head a little, “Not right now. It’s too late and she has enough trouble sleeping as it is. I don’t want to get her all riled up with anxiety.” She swallows, shaking her head, “Quite honestly, he doesn’t deserve it. Tell him to write a letter.” Bernie leans back against the sofa, folding her arms. She lets silence fill the space for a moment. “Cam, are you there?”

“Yeah.” Cameron nods a little, “I’ll take care of it, Mum.” He touches the screen of his phone, not understanding himself. Why would he think his sister would entertain speaking with the man who attempted to kill her? Why would she accept the excuse of a brain tumor for his violent actions toward her? She was better without him, and without any contact with him. His mother was right.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

After some celebratory love making over their engagement the night previous, Bernie realizes Serena's anxiety is through the roof about the holiday.

Charlotte prepares for the bombardment of family later in the day by preparing very early.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY CHRISTMAS!

2 chapters today instead of just the one.

Bernie squints an eye open, turning her head away from the bright light entering the window of the bedroom they share. Clad in nothing except her new engagement ring, she tilts her head up from resting against Serena’s chest, a look of bliss spreading across her face as she softly kisses against the hollow of her fiance’s neck, “Merry, merry Christmas, baby.” Bernie smirks, singing softly.

Serena hums a light giggle, running her hand through the other woman’s hair, herself also clad in nothing other than her new engagement ring. “Happy Christmas, Berenice.” She inhales the air deeply, “Smells like roasting ham.” She hums her delight. “Still morning, isn’t it?”

Glancing over to the alarm clock on the nightstand, “Bit after eight.” Bernie absently runs her hand along her girlfriend’s hip, “No one is due over until afternoon, correct?” She slowly pushes herself up from the mattress, finding her festive red and green plaid pajama bottoms on the floor, as well as her matching Santa Claus t-shirt.

“Oh, where are you going?” Serena pouts playfully, possibly still the slightest bit tipsy from the night previous since it involved them staying awake for a couple afters after retiring to their bedroom. The mulled wine Charlotte had made was addictive, to put it mildly. “Come back here. We can have-”

“I am hungry.” Bernie kneels onto the bed, pressing her lips against that of her partner, “I can make you breakfast in bed...also, I want to make sure Charlotte isn’t overdoing it down there.” She notices Serena nod a little, “I’ll be back in a bit if you’re good with breakfast in bed...or you can come down as well. We can turn on the tree and relax before it starts to become hectic with a full house.”
“That’s so tempting.” Serena hums, “Have some coffee, maybe a slice of that ginger cake Charlotte made the other day.”

“Or I can make breakfast. Sausage and eggs-”

“I’d rather cake, if it’s all the same to you.”

Bernie smirks a bit, knowing of her partner’s pension for sweets when she had a few drinks in her. “Whatever you want, Campbell.” She kisses her once more before climbing off the bed fully, “Want me to get your pajamas out? Make Char think we slept in them last night?”

Serena offers an amused grin toward her girlfriend, “Well, I can’t very well go downstairs like this.”

“You could...it would be one hell of a gift for me.” Bernie waves her eyebrows toward her as she moves over to the dressing table, reaching into a drawer for her red silk pajamas and tossing them onto the foot of the bed. “Though I’ll love undressing you after breakfast.”

“I bet you will.” Serena gives her a wink, watching as she leaves the room. Today was going to be incredibly hard and she knows that. Lifting her hand a bit, she peers to her hand, taking in the antique engagement ring adorning her ring finger. As long as she stays by Bernie’s side, things should be okay.

The sound of Christmas music filling the house and can only be heard once she opened the bedroom door. Bernie bounces down the stairs, using the white hair tie that seems to be constantly on her wrist to pull her messy blonde hair back in a small ponytail. Believing her daughter would be in the kitchen, she makes her way there first, inhaling deeply. “Happy Christmas!” She says jovilly, noticing the kitchen is empty. “Okay.” She mumbles to herself, moving around the house and finding the young woman in the lounge, resting on the sofa. “Char?”

Charlotte opens her eyes slowly, a genuine smile slowly forming on her lips as she glances toward her mother. “Happy Christmas.” She starts to stretch, a simple festive apron tied around her waist, barely able to be tied anyway. “I’m guessing you both enjoyed your Christmas Eve surprise last night. Not the most quiet individuals...”

Bernie begins to blush, a sheepish smile spreading across her face as she moves closer to her daughter, “We certainly did. I want that family picture in a large size for the wall. We loved them.”
“Let me see your ring.” Charlotte had caught the gentle glimmer against the fairy lights of the tree. She reaches out toward her mother, smiling when the woman places her hand in hers, “Oh Mum, that’s lovely. Congratulations, about time for you lot.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty happy.” She lowers herself next to the young woman, gently rubbing the palm of her hand against her daughter’s large middle, “When did you even wake?”

“Can’t really sleep these days as it is.” Charlotte shrugs, “Four or five. I’m surprised you haven’t heard the music.” She watches her mother’s hand closely, reaching over to move it where she feels the babe pressing with his feet most within her. “He feels like his feet are down at the moment.”

Bernie raises an eyebrow, “Like his Mum.”

“I know.” Her voice singsong from hearing the story a thousand times, “Hopefully he moves around when he needs to.” Charlotte leans her head against the back of the sofa, “I don’t want this to be about me today. It’s about everyone...especially Guinevere.”

“Yes, madam.” Bernie brings her hand to her own forehead, saluting her daughter. “Do you need help in the kitchen?”

Charlotte shakes her head, “Everything is in the oven that needs to be there. Ham, brussel sprouts, parsnips. Potatoes are boiling on the stove, but I just put those on, so they need to go for a bit longer before mashing.” She thinks, “I’ll put dessert in the oven in a bit.”

“I can take care of that.” Bernie smiles a little, standing after a moment, “I’m going to go and take a shower in a moment, you can write down times that things need to go in and come out. Serena and I can tend to things while you prepare yourself then...and maybe even get yourself a quick rest in.”

“Well, things need to stay in the oven for a while.” The young woman clears her throat, running a hand over her pulled back hair. “Are you sure, Mum? I can-”

“I’m absolutely positive. You’ve done so much.” Bernie gives a squeeze to her daughter’s shoulder, leaving the room to make her way back up to her bedroom. She opens the bedroom door to see her nude fiance still in bed, scrolling through her mobile. “I thought you weren’t far behind me.”
“I thought we could...take a shower together.” Serena raises a brow, smirking a little as she sets the mobile down onto the bed next to her. “Or I can run a bath...bit of a warm Happy Christmas to us.”

Bernie knows what Serena’s doing. She understands her reasons behind it. Maybe they would need to play things her way for a bit. “That sounds fantastic. We better get to it before it grows too late and people begin arriving...and giving Charlotte some time to ready herself as well.”

Serena slowly climbs across the mattress, closing in on her partner, gently pushing her against the closed door as she leans in. She presses her lips against her partner’s, needing to feel something other than her own depression over the course of today. After a moment, she tilts her head back, meeting Bernie’s eyes, “We’re going to be okay today.” She’s mostly saying it to herself, she thinks.

Reaching a hand out to gently place on her partner’s cheek, Bernie nods a little, “Absolutely.” She leans forward, placing a soft kiss to her hairline, feeling like she needs to hold Serena closely, protect her from her own thoughts, “Let’s go scrub up...I’ll wash your back for you.” She amuses, knowing she needs to keep the woman close throughout the day, “We have a busy day ahead of us.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Guinevere Haynes finds amusement in an unlikely source.

Cameron slips his sister a letter to read a day later.

Jason nearly stops the festivities with a single question.

Jason sits on the hardwood floor of his aunt’s home, smiling a little as Cameron plays with Guinevere, using one of the many toys he had purchased her for Christmas. “I’ve noticed that you continue to refer to yourself as Uncle Cameron with Guinevere. Is that what you would like for her to call you? Even though you aren’t her real uncle?”

Cameron glances over to the younger man, nodding a little, “Well, it wouldn’t be very fair for Char’s son to call me Uncle Cam and Gwen not to...especially when I’m going to treat her the same way.” He smiles a little, “If you’d rather I not-”

“I think it’s okay.” Jason nods, “Like how I call Auntie Bernie my aunt even though she and Auntie Serena aren’t married yet.” The couple had let people know their news as they arrived little by little throughout the day. “I am very happy for them.”

“I think we all are, bro.” Cam chuckles as the girl pushes the toy aside, crawling over to him and climbing into his lap. “Want to go get a sweet?” He rises from the floor, noticing Greta’s nervous gaze fall upon him, “Just a dried fruit...maybe a biscuit. Nothing she can’t handle, promise.” Seeing the young mother relax a bit, moving over to be next to her partner. Entering the kitchen, he sees his sister with her bottom edged against the kitchen table. “Everything okay?”

Charlotte nods, glancing over to her brother. She gives a genuine smile when she sees the six-month-old in his arm, “Here.” She offers the babe a fresh dried apricot, watching as she begins to gum it, only having a few teeth in her mouth so far. “She’s so sweet, isn’t she?”

“She really is.” He nods a little, “I’m glad you’re in here alone. I need to speak with you about something.” Cameron reaches into his back pocket to the folded envelope, handing it over to his sister. “Listen, Mum and Serena didn’t want me to bring this up with you.” His voice low, only for her ears, knowing the baby wouldn’t say anything about the conversation. “It’s for you to decide...and something you need to know about. I know you feel like you owe a great deal to Mum and Serena-”
“I do owe a great deal to them.” Charlotte holds the envelope between her fingertips, absently attempting to flatten the wrinkle in the envelope, looking to her name written on the front, “Anders’ handwriting.” She says quietly, then lifts her head to look at her brother. “Why are you speaking with him?”

“It isn’t...” Cameron sighs, shaking his head, “He’s my patient. Just...read it. Okay? I’m not asking you to speak with him or see him, I don’t want you to do that, but you should know what’s going on.” He glances down to the babe who is still focusing on her apricot, then back over to his sister. “You don’t need to open it now, Char, wait until we all leave. Just...don’t tell Mum I said anything to you?” Cam notices her subtle nod, motioning to the lounge, “Come and join the rest of us.” He holds out his hand for her.

Charlotte glances to his outstretched palm, folding the envelope again and slipping it into the back pocket of her denim trousers. She places her hand in his, letting him guide her to the rest of the room. She catches sight of her mother kissing Serena on the top of her head, “Oh, for god’s sake, get a room you two.” She’s amused, thrilled that her mother is happy with someone for the first time in her life, knowing that person was never going to be Marcus since she was a child.

“Our house.” Bernie playfully scowls to her, sitting on the arm of the sofa as Serena sits on the cushion next to her, “Where did you run off to?”

Taking a cautious seat next to her stepmother, Charlotte smiles a little, “Just put the dessert in. Figured we could wait a bit after dinner for it.” She feels Serena’s arm wrap around her before she continues, “Sticky toffee pudding or cheesecake are the options...and probably going to be in our chiller for a while after the fact.”

“They sound delicious.” Serena nods, rubbing the young woman’s arm. “I positively love the new cheetah print work slippers you gifted me...as well as the new Best Grandmother broach.” It amused her greatly, but it also hurt at the same time. She appreciated Charlotte’s desire to include her in every way she possibly could.

Leaning over to speak into the woman’s ear, “I didn’t know what you’d rather be called. Mum got one too...I pinned it to her coat, but she doesn’t know that yet.” Charlotte smirks, hearing Serena give a throaty chuckle.

“No secrets, please.” Jason watches them, his arms comfortably wrapped around his bent up knees. Greta leans against him, her eyes glued to her mobile. “Charlotte, did Auntie Serena tell you that I liked World’s Strongest Man?” Seeing her subtle negative head shake, he continues, “How did you know?”
“We’ve spoken about it before. When you all came over for Fish and Chips last week. In fact, we speak of it each time.” Charlotte smiles a little, “I’m just glad the shirt fits.” She glances down to his chest, amused that he was currently wearing it, having immediately pulled it on when he opened the box. “It looks lovely on you.”

Greta smiles a little that her partner seems so excited about just a simple collared shirt with embroidery. She glances over to Cameron and her daughter, the young man allowing the babe to climb all over him as he lies on his stomach on the floor. “She seems to really like you.”

“Girls love me.” Cameron grins, chuckling a little as the babe rolls over next to him, playing with his short beard hair.

“Go ahead, Gwen, pull it off.” Charlotte begins to cackle as she hears her brother groan and the baby give a belly laugh from his pain, “Tell him to just shave it, for the love of christ.”

“I think he looks rather dashing with his new facial hair.” Bernie gives a single nod toward her son after sticking up for him.

“Well, you’re a lesbian. So-”

“Were you a lesbian when you were married to Cameron and Charlotte’s father for many years, Auntie Bernie?” Jason tilts his head to the side, attempting to study the woman’s face even though he has never been very good with emotions or expressions. “Or was it more like Auntie Serena and one day you decided to kiss girls?” It causes the room to go completely silent, with exception to the old Christmas music playing through the record player speakers.

“I don’t think that was a good question.” Greta says quietly, lifting her eyes very quickly to glance around the room.

Serena begins to finally give a hearty belly laugh, probably the hardest she’s laughed in weeks. She smiles broadly, mostly from the look of sheer shook from her other guests, save for Guinevere and her parents who don’t really know what’s going on. “I kissed one girl, Jason, and now I’m going to be getting married to her.”

“The Wolfe genes are known for irresistibility.” Bernie shrugs, not answering Jason’s question, but glad when her children appear more amused as time goes on.
She’s always known. It was the rest of us that didn’t understand it at the time, but she loved us so much that she tried her hardest to make things work with our Dad.” Cameron attempts to explain, knowing his mother wasn’t entirely comfortable with the subject. He props his head up with his arm as he turns to his side to face everyone better, Guinevere still absolutely fascinated with his facial hair. “She quickly learned, however, once she came back...that being herself was far more important than trying to conform. We may have had our rough patches, but Char and I are incredibly proud of her for it.” He tilts his head, looking to his mother only to capture her wiping a fallen tear from her cheek. “Oh, come on, Madre. No tears now! It’s Christmas!” Cam attempts, successfully, to get his mother to smile, “Also, I get a really fantastic stepmum out of this deal. So, I’m pretty happy about it.”

“You’re such a sappy bastard.” Charlotte leans against Serena a bit, a proud smirk on her face.

“I told you, girls love me.” Cam waves his eyebrows, watching as the baby deserts him to go to Serena, trying to pull up using the woman’s trouser leg. “That’s fine, abandon me like every other woman I’ve ever loved. Go on to your Nan.” He teases a bit, not actually caring.

Serena leans down, lifting the crawling girl to her lap after snaking her arm from behind Charlotte. She’s surprised when Jason doesn’t correct Cam, but happy about it nonetheless. Maybe their togetherness is helping her nephew understand that family names and titles don’t necessarily have to go to those that fit them biologically, but those that fit them in the space of their family. She knows Jason would never refer to her as his Mum and she doesn’t exactly know if she wants him to, but the possibility of Guinevere calling her Nan makes her elated beyond belief. “What’s that about irresistibility?”

“You’re about to marry into it, making you a Wolfe by proxy.” Bernie offers, earning an eye roll from her partner, causing her to give her loud, honking chuckle.

Charlotte carefully pushes herself up, belly first, from the sofa, “Who wants dessert?”
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Charlotte reads the letter given to her by her brother the day previous.

Serena and Charlotte are held prisoner in their own home by a known family foe.

Chapter Notes

Some of things someone says here are less than savory and may be triggering to some. Just be warned.

Also, Boxing Day...AmIRight?

Charlotte finally reads the letter her brother had given her the night previously, finding it on the floor this morning once she awakened. Sitting at the breakfast table within the confines of the kitchen, she sips from a mug of tea, slowly reading the shakily handwritten letter detailing his diagnosis and requesting that she give him no sympathy.

*I deserved all of this. This is all what they call Karma. The doctors say this is what caused me to do those things to you, but I don’t think so. You’re far better without me.*

The young woman takes another sip of her warm drink, tears brimming in her eyes.

*I tried to contact you on multiple occasions to tell you all of this, but I really shouldn’t have. It isn’t my place and I’ve hurt you far too much and far too many times. I do love you, my dear Charlotte. I’m only sorry I was never able to really show you love in the way you should have been shown. Please, tell our child of the good things. Don’t make me a hero, I definitely wasn’t that in any way, but maybe about our holidays. Maybe about the time we went to France for an entire week in the spur of the moment. If it’s a girl, I’m certain you’ll teach her to be a strong, independent woman like you used to be before I got to you. If it’s a boy, teach him to be the opposite of who I was. Teach him to be kind and to never be afraid of showing weakness or love.*

Charlotte runs a hand through her hair, tucking a piece behind her ear as her tears run freely, blurring her vision slightly.
None of my wrongs can be made right, and I know that. However, I love you, Charlotte. Nothing is ever going to change that. I wish the best for you and the child we’ve created. Your child now. Don’t look for me. I won’t be staying in the hospital like your brother believes. If I attempt to contact you after this, I highly doubt it will be me. It will be the tumor talking and I apologize in advance.

Included within this envelope is the deed to the house, I’ve changed it to be in your name. I don’t know if you’ll ever feel comfortable there again, but it really doesn’t matter. You can sell it if that’s what you please. Buy yourself a different place. Do whatever you want. It’s all yours. You’ll also notice that I’ve given you substantial financial support and you’ll receive even more upon my demise. It should be more than enough for you to return to school if you wish. You would make an excellent doctor.

The young woman tosses the letter onto the table, away from herself before breaking into heavy sobs. Charlotte’s elbows rest against the table with her head in her hands, groaning as a contraction hits her. She feels a hand gently touch the space between her shoulder blades at the same time, but decides against acknowledging it.

Serena furrows her brow, listening to the young woman, but remembering her own haywired hormones when she was pregnant with Elinor. Glancing onto the table, she picks up the discarded letter, quickly understanding the reason for the young woman’s sorrow. She reaches over after taking a seat close to her near stepdaughter, “Charlotte, let me help you.”

Charlotte lifts her head finally, meeting the other woman’s eyes, “I don’t want him to die this way.”

“There’s no right way for someone to die.” Her words tender and truthful. Serena hates seeing the young woman this way. “Deep breaths, we need to get you calmed.” She starts to worry, of course. She always worries though she won’t outright admit it.

Leaning forward, Charlotte places her head onto Serena’s shoulder, following the other woman’s lead of inhaling and exhaling deeply. The exercise also calms her tears significantly. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Serena strokes the young woman’s hair absently, amusing herself that it has the same texture of Bernie’s. “Your Mum went into work early, so it’s just the two of us today, if it’s all the same for you. Anything you’d like to box up and take back to the store on this Boxing Day?”

Charlotte snorts her amusement, “No, I love everything. Even the blanket from Jason and Greta that just says Golden on it...and made me laugh for a solid twenty minutes after I opened it. It just doesn’t make any sense. I love it so much though.”

“Having everyone all together in one space means more to me than absolutely anything.” Serena
glances toward the hallway when she hears the knocker on the door swing. “I’d better get that. I had ordered something for your Mum that never arrived in time.” She gently helps the young woman sit up before standing and moving to the front door. She opens it quickly, only being met by the man whose letter she had just read a small portion of. “You said yourself that you shouldn’t be here.”

“I’ll be wherever I want to be.” Anders has a pistol pointed at her, able to conceal it within the confines of his thick overcoat. He pushes his way into Serena, knocking her back against the banister of the stairs. He closes the door behind himself, pulling the pistol out more, “Come on, up you go, Ms. Campbell.” He pulls her to stand straighter by the shoulder of her shirt. “You look as lovely as ever.”

“What do you want, Anders?” Serena stands in front of him, terrified, but maintaining a stern expression.

“You have something here that belongs to me.” He nods, “And I’m here to get it back.”

“Charlotte is not your possession.”

Anders brings a hand to his head, wincing slightly as it pounds. He pushes the muzzle of the pistol against Serena’s head, “We’re going to have a chat. Let’s go to your lounge...and then, you’re going to call my wife.”

“You will not hurt her.” Serena shakes her head ever so slightly, tears brimming in her eyes. “I won’t let you.” She receives a backhand across her cheek, the man’s angry eyes glaring.

Charlotte stands in the doorway between the hall and the kitchen, “Leave her out of this.” Her belly much larger than he had seen previously and she walks with a waddle when she nears him, “I knew you wouldn’t be able to stay away. How about that? Always running back to me.’” She’s more confident and far less afraid than what she used to be.

Anders nears her, his face turning to that of an unimpressed sneer when his hand quickly wraps around her neck, just holding it there. “What’s stopping me from killing you where you stand and tearing my child from your loins?”

“You won’t like her.” Charlotte knows that if the child were female, this side of him would be less likely to desire stealing the baby. She feels his hand closing in and brings her hands to wrap around his wrist in an attempt to stop him, her breaths turning to strained gasps.
“Stop it!” Serena hits at his back, only to have his pistol swing back and hitting her in the mouth, causing her a gash over her lips, as he lets the younger woman go.

“Into the lounge.” Anders demands more forcefully, barking at the women and keeping as close an eye on the duo as he can. This isn’t his turf, however. He doesn’t really know where things are or if there was anything in arms’ length that they could fight him with. “On your knees.”

Charlotte holds Serena’s hand once she lowers herself to the floor. She was used to this side of this man, but Serena wasn’t. “I’ll come back with you, Anders. If that’s what you want, I’ll come back with you and we can be a family again if you just let my stepmother go.”

Anders hums, amused with the revelation, “Stepmother, eh? You’re the one Bernie shacked up with?” He stands over the women before crouching in front of them, “Tell me, Ms. Campbell, does she taste as good as she looks?”

Serena closes her eyes and bows her head toward the floor, not about to answer the man’s invasive question.

“Does her touch make you go wild with anticipation?” Anders moves a bit closer, his mouth only a couple centimeters from her ear, causing her to have goosebumps, “Do you wish to fuck Char too? Spitting image of the Major. Bet the younger axe wound tastes twice as sweet.”

Charlotte angrily headbuts against him, knocking him back as he madly chuckles. “I said to leave her alone.” Her vision blurred now, but she attempts to maintain eye contact with him.

“Bit jealous, are you, love?” Anders sits up, a large grin covering his face. “You know, you did most of your best work on your knees, Char.”

Squeezing Serena’s hand a bit harder, Charlotte watches him, as she has another contraction. She exhales softly, “Cleaning floors, sucking you off, and kissing your arse.” She’s heard him say it before when he was drunk, maintaining a straight face. “It wasn’t funny then and it still isn’t funny now.”

Anders rushes forward, knocking her back. He brings his fist into heavy contact with her face, giving three solid hits before crawling off of her, “It was fucking funny.”
Serena opens her eyes, watching the display when she felt Charlotte let go of her hand suddenly. “Leave her alone. You’re hitting a pregnant woman.” She yells toward the man, moving over to the young woman’s side when the bruises are already starting to form, her nose has a steady stream of blood dripping. She ignores her own face.

“I didn’t tell you to move.” He glares, pulling her away aggressively. Anders brings a hand to his head again, groaning loudly at the sharp pain within his skull.

“Let me tend to her, please.” Serena swallows hard, knowing her words cracked slightly as she spoke them. When the man doesn’t answer, she slowly moves to Char’s side anyway. “Charlotte.” Serena sees the trickle of blood from the young woman’s nose, adjusting them both so the Charlotte’s head is on her lap. She uses her index and middle fingers to test for a pulse against her near stepdaughter’s neck.

Charlotte begins to open her eyes after a moment, seeing Serena above her. She smiles a little, “Can’t keep me down.” She clears her throat a bit, “Did I pass out again?”

“Well...yes, but not from your blood pressure.” Serena hears the man begin to pace near them, but doesn’t glance over to him. “It’s okay. Anything hurt?”

“Just tired.” Her voice light, “you’re hurt.”

“I’m fine, but I’m afraid I’m going to need you to stay awake.” Serena attempts a reassuring smile, running her short nails against the young woman’s scalp to comfort her. “Anders is here...and we’re just going to do whatever it is he needs us to do. Agree?”

Charlotte nods a little, having hoped that portion was a dream. “I can do that.” She winces, giving an audible whimper this time, feeling the woman jump slightly. “These contractions today are no joke. I’m sorry.” She carefully pushes herself up to a sitting position, using the floor as leverage. “Can I just sit?”

“How is this going to work if you lot tell me what to do instead of the other way around?” Anders doesn’t look impressed, a hint of frustrated anger behind his eye. He crouches in front of her, placing a gentle hand to the other side of her face, “Are you okay?” He leans in, softly pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth, “My anger got the best of me.”
Gritting her teeth within her closed mouth, Charlotte just watches him intensely. She pulls her face away from his hand and closes her eyes when she notices him lift the same hand in anticipation of backhanding her. However, it doesn’t happen, she can hear when he’s walked away and she opens her eyes again.

Hopefully, Bernie Wolfe will be able to take a hint.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Bernie's worst fears are confirmed.

Ric joins forces with Bernie in order to save his friends.

Chapter Notes

I actually quite liked Leah, so she'll be sticking around for a while yet. Don't worry though. Everything will be fine. I do hope this chapter is easy to visualize (I can see how it wouldn't be). Lots of running around on Bernie's part.

Also, in case you haven't been reading the comments, there will be a couple of extra chapters for the New Year!

Bernie offers a smile to the patient in the bed, slowly backing away as she draws his curtain closed again. She gives an exasperated sigh, gaining an amused chuckle from Dominic Copeland. “Diabetic male, seventy-six. Has been in four times for sepsis over the past three months, according to his patient history, and it’s all coming from infected toes. Multiple. I told him that it would be an easy fix. All we need to do is remove the toes, because it’s probably going to spread to the foot soon, if it hasn’t already and he continually declines. Each time.”

“Well, maybe he doesn’t want to buy smaller shoes.” Dom offers, sarcastically with a smirk. “Meant to ask, how was your Christmas?”

“Oh, fantastic. We laughed more than we cried, which I think is probably a good thing. Also got engaged, but I’m attempting to keep that a bit quiet until Serena gets back.” Bernie nods, unable to hide a blush and smile, “Yours?”

“My husband and I had a nice, quiet dinner with my Mum and his grandmother.”

“How is she? Heard she’s quite the pistol.”

Dom nods slowly, “Oh, she is, but that’s the best part. Biggest heart too. We had a lovely time.”
“Who does?” Leah walks closer after entering the ward, “I’m with you guys today. Heard you were a touch short.”

“Dr. Faulkner, so nice to see you again. Yes, maybe you should give this one a try.” Bernie offers her the thick folder in her hand, “Give his history a once over and try to figure out a tactic. He’s refused to listen to Dr. Copeland or myself. Maybe you’d have better luck.”

“No problem, Major.” The bleach blonde gives a quick nod, opening the folder to immerse herself in the man’s story.

“Major.” Dom gives a teasing salute as he backs away from the surgeon, making his way toward another patient on the Keller ward.

Bernie exhales, amused with the younger people as she checks her mobile when it has vibrated. *He is here. Help.* She furrows her brow, couldn’t be Anders Hero. He’s on Darwin, isn’t he? She reaches behind the nurses’ station, lifting the phone onto the desk to call the other unit, “Dr. Petrenko, this is Bernie Wolfe, can you tell me if you have a patient by the name of Anders Hero in your ward still?”

Petrenko begins to shake her head as if the woman can see her, “We put out a warning this morning in case he went to another ward. He’s very ill, but we believe him to have probably left the facility.” She picks her head up, catching sight of Cameron pacing, “Your son does not seem too thrilled.”

“I’d imagine not. Thanks.” Bernie abruptly returns the receiver to the base, making her way to Dom quickly, “You need to call for another consultant. I have a family emergency that requires my immediate attention and I need to leave.” She nods, leaving her things in the locker room as she makes her way to the stairs. Bernie quickly realizes that one of the things she left in said locker room was her car keys just as she exits through the automatic doors to the car park.

“Something wrong?” Ric furrows his brow, seeing his close friend’s alarmed expression as he walks up the pathway, usually used by ambulances.

“ Anders is at the house. I need to go. Can I borrow your keys-”

“You shouldn’t be driving in this state.” He shakes his head, “You should call the police. Let them handle this.”
“If I let them handle this, he’s liable to kill Serena and Charlotte both. I can get in without him seeing me and I can subdue him. Then we can call the police.” Bernie reasons with him, “You know, better yet, you drive. I could use the backup.”

For some reason, Ric follows behind her, “In what way would I be backup? I wasn’t Army trained like you.”

“You trained as a boxer...also, you went to prison. I’d reckon you had to protect yourself there.” She forgets which car is his until he motions to it, climbing behind the passenger side when she hears him unlock it with the keyless entry remote, still clad in her berry colored scrubs.

He doesn’t like to talk about his time while incarcerated, but she was correct. Men had bested him, but with most, he could hold his own when he needed to. Ric glances over to her after climbing behind the wheel and starting the car, “So you subdue him and what? What if they’ve been hurt or worse?”

“I’d rather just think of what my plan is...and the alternative.” Bernie stares straight ahead, incredibly focused. A different side of her needing to make an appearance. The side that trained for weeks on how to fight in close quarters and use the objects around you as weapons, even including one’s own hands. She’s only ever had to use it a handful of times, but she still trained a bit every year when she was serving. “I’ll go through the back door and you draw his attention to the front.” Bernie says after going silent for a few moments. “He won’t answer the door on his own, he’ll have one of them to answer it and even if he pulls you in, I can take him from behind.”

“Sounds simple enough.” Ric nods, focusing on the road and going ever so slightly above the speed limit, “Second plan?”

“The opposite. Draw his attention to the back, I’ll come in the front. Both options require a bit of glancing through the windows very carefully to see exactly where they are...recon, if you will.” Bernie nods, “Option three is that I scale the back trellis of the house and climb through the bedroom window. Lock is broken on the one in our room, so I know I could get in there. However, he would hear me coming down the stairs probably.”

Ric raises an eyebrow, “I’d like to see you scale the side of the house like some sort of primate.” He smirks to himself, “I know you would though. No doubting that. Anything for them.”

The car hardly comes to a stop, few houses down as to not draw any unnecessary attention from
those within her home, as she climbs out, “You check the front, I’ll check the back. We’ll come together in the middle. Make sure you aren’t seen.” Bernie knows she can depend on the man. She does as she said they should, returning to the middle as they give each other a thumbs up.

Moving back around to the front door, Ric knocks, mustering all the courage he possibly can as he stands straighter. He was going to help his friend no matter the cost.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Ric puts himself in harms' way just to be a distraction.

Bernie puts that Army training to good use in order to save her family, but is it too little too late?

Chapter Notes

Doctors aren't always right. Just remember that.

Also, please be careful with your New Years celebrations tonight! I want to hear you've all gotten home safely.

“Who is that?” Anders begins to glare toward Serena, quickly rising from his place on the high backed chair.

“I don’t know unless I open it.” Serena shakes her head a little, thankful for whoever was behind that front door. “Or if you answer it. If it’s a neighbor, they know my car, and that you’re unfamiliar to them. They’ll know I’m home.” She stands when he motions for her to do so.

“Answer it, but don’t try anything.” Anders nearly growls, watching from the doorway, keeping the pistol pointed onto her.

Serena nods a little, taking a deep breath before opening the heavy wooden door. She nearly grins when she sees her old friend standing there. Her chin trembling as her eyes threaten to cry. She clears her throat, “How can I help you?”

“I came to check your uh...washer. A Bernie Wolfe scheduled an appointment for repair.” Ric nods, trying to read her lips when she mouths something to him, but not understanding it. Her lips are split and bleeding quite a bit, which is catching his attention far more, “So if I could-”

“No, now isn’t a very good time. Family...issue. Do you know what the issue was that she called about? Bernie has a habit of breaking that thing regularly. She’s fixed it a few times, but I suppose she believes this is above her repair abilities.” Serena nods, trying again, Labor.
Ric understands this time, his eyes widening a bit. “Is she here? Ms. Wolfe, is she here?”

“Yep.” Bernie answers from behind her partner, garnering the attention of the gunman at the same time. She stuns him with a heavy blow to his throat with a clothesline from her forearm, knowing it wasn’t enough to crush his windpipe, but just enough to knock the wind out of him. She is able to quickly scale his weakened form from behind and grapple him to the floor, slamming his head against it for good measure. She pulls his hands to his back, pressing her knee on top of them, knowing he wouldn’t be able to move. “Serena, get the handcuffs.”

“You have handcuffs?” Charlotte curls her lip in mock disgust, though she doesn’t actually care. She hears as Serena rushes up the stairs, “I don’t want to know.” She breathes heavily through another contraction, “Ric?” She’s glad to see him, feeling herself beginning to cry a bit when he kneels in front of her, “Probably looks worse than it is.”

“Shouldn’t look that way in the first place.” Ric shakes his head, reaching into his pocket to fetch his mobile. He touches the screen, calling for police. He outstretches his hand to gently touch the young woman’s forearm reassuringly, hearing his friend return with a pair of handcuffs. “Bet you didn’t think they would come in handy.”

“I, in fact, did not.” Serena shakes her head, amused, “at least not for more than we use them for.”

“What’s happening? Where am I?” Anders rests his head against the wood, seeing his former partner through his nearly blurred vision. “Charlotte? Is that you?”

Bernie chuckles bitterly, securing the cuffs and sitting him up aggressively, doing her best not to hurt him even fuller, though that’s really what she would rather do, “Think that’s going to work?”

“Mum.” Charlotte shakes her head a little toward the woman before focusing on the man, “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde...at least there’s a reason for it all, eh?” She answers quietly, slowly crawling toward him. She kneels in front of the man, reaching a hand up to his cheek, “You...you need to be somewhere that you can be properly tended to. A place where you cannot run away.” Her tone gentle, shaking her head a little, “Mr. Hyde is far too powerful for you to control properly on your own...and you need help.”

Anders feels his tears begin to form in his eyes, seeing the damage he made to her face, “Char. I hurt you.” His reaction genuine as he begins to sob, “I just...I just want this all to be over. I can’t keep on with this.” He had declined the multiple bypass, letting them continue to treat him for symptoms.
instead. “My heart belongs to you, but...I can’t control my reactions to it and I...I am so sorry.”

“I know.” Leaning in and kissing his lips tenderly, even though the front of her face is covered in blood, Charlotte nods once they separate. “If you go with the police and play by their rules, I’ll visit you once the baby is born...if you’re alive then.” She can see it in his eyes and by the overall change in his skin tone and muscle mass, he doesn’t have much longer left. “You need to go with them...and don’t try to get out.”

“If that’s what you want.” Anders nods a little, “I wish...I wish I was in control far more than not. We would have had a better life.”

“Probably.” Charlotte answers honestly, moving back to where she was previously, feeling herself starting to calm down. “I lied before, by the way, it’s a boy.” She notices his subtle smile, knowing they were being watched by the others. “I just need a nap.” She glances to her mother again. “Serena told me I couldn’t.”

“I’m certain you can see why I told her not to.” Serena finally takes a seat on the sofa, “I didn’t get a chance to check her eyes, but-”

Ric reaches into his suit jacket, removing his pen torch and shining it into the younger woman’s eyes, “Seems okay, but I wouldn’t mind an MRI to be sure...and you can nap in hospital.” He stands after a moment, leaning down to help the young woman do the same, “I can take her to hospital and get the ball rolling. The two of you stay for the police?” He notices their quick nods as he wraps an arm around the young woman, leading her toward his car, “How are you feeling?”

Charlotte snorts, shaking her head a little. “I don’t know anymore.”

Serena and Bernie stay put with Anders Hero until the police arrive, taking him away. Serena tells them of his ailment, hoping he’ll be treated as Charlotte wished, though she honestly doesn’t care. She slowly glances over to her partner once the police leave, feeling her chin trembling as her eyes flood with tears, “You saved our lives.”

Bernie moves closer to her, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend tightly, needing to feel her close. She closes her eyes in the embrace, “Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“I don’t...” Serena leans her head against Bernie’s shoulder, “I don’t know what I thought...what I feel. I wasn’t expecting him...or for Charlotte to remain as calm as she did. I thought I could handle
“It’s all over now.” Bernie presses a kiss to the woman’s shoulder, “Let’s get to hospital. We need to take your car.” She doesn’t want to let her partner go, however. She just wants to hold her, finding herself swaying. “Did he...did he hurt you-?”

It takes Serena a moment to figure out what was being asked before she shakes her head, “Nothing we couldn’t handle.” Her split lip says otherwise.

“I'll put a stitch or two in that.” Bernie gives a nod toward her partner’s lips, noticing Serena licking the wound little by little as it drips. She follows her partner to the coats, quickly realizing she left without putting one on. Just wearing her long sleeved cotton top under her scrubs. She's freezing. Grabbing one of her partner’s many scarfs, “Hold this to your face.” She feels the need to motion to her partner’s lip again, “I’ll drive. Police will want to speak with you and Char at some point today.” Bernie retrieves her partner’s keys from the bowl by the front door, wrapping a protective arm around her waist as they finally leave the house.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Fleur treats Charlotte and is surprised by her source of support.

Ric informs Charlotte of his own history with his daughter.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Not celebrating "new year" in the fic because of the events from Boxing Day carrying on for a few chapters, but I do hope you all have a safe, happy, and healthy 2019. Something has got to give.

ALSO, Harry Linstrom is played by the incredibly talented and adorable Erin Kellyman in my head. Just imagine her in scrubs with that beautiful wild mane (sadly) pulled back. She'll come back later on.

“Boxing day. You’re supposed to be at home, relaxing with a nice cuppa, in front of your tree before you need to take it down. You’re not supposed to be here.” Fleur Fanshawe scowls playfully, knowing the nurses have already taken her vitals, “And your brought Ric along. How did you manage that one?”

“Didn’t have much choice...and he’s cute when he’s worried.” Charlotte smirks a little, her expression obviously tired. They had immediately had her change into a hospital gown as they had attached monitors to her, when she first arrived. She hates hospital gowns.

“I really believe she needs an MRI on her head. Serena said she suffered several blows.” Ric folds his arms, “She had a split lip herself. I know Bernie’s going to want to tend to that one on her own.
They should be up soon enough.” He seems solid, not necessarily liking this unit, but being no stranger to it.

Fleur’s amused that he’s taken such an interest, honestly. She doesn’t understand exactly what happened, but can see the fresh bruises and swollen cheek on her young patient, so knows it was probably quite serious. “Any fluid leaking, vaginal bleeding, mucus?” She snorts, amused when the man turns away a little.

“No, just contractions. Last I paid attention, they were about eight minutes apart...then I started to get too tired, and they were too painful for me to keep track.” Charlotte shakes her head, groaning loudly through a contraction that she was just referencing.

“Okay, just breathe through it as best you can.” Fleur nods, glancing to her F1 that seems to be following most of her movements, “Let’s get Wolfe cub some Terbutaline. We’re going to keep her until things calm down a bit. She’s going to be on bed rest for the rest of this pregnancy.”

“Best rest? No, come on.” Charlotte watches the pair closely, “I can’t do bed rest.”

“Why not?” The short statured consultant dramatically raises her eyebrow, “You haven’t a place of work, nor are you going to school. I’d say, this was the best time for you to be on bed rest.” Fleur offers, “Not to mention, I had a feeling this was going to happen anyway because of that car accident you were in before we first met.”

The F1, Harriet ‘Harry’ Linstrom, gently inserts a line into the young woman’s arm, surprised she’s able to without the help of an experienced nurse. “Saline drip, you’re a little dehydrated and anemic. We’re going to take care of all of that...and, hopefully, stop those pesky contractions.” She offers a reassuring smile.

“I agree with your idea for a scan. I’ll get that going for you.” Fleur gently places a hand on her patient’s forearm, “One way or another, everything is going to be okay. If he’s ready now, he’s developed enough that he’ll more than likely be absolutely fine. However, we’re going to try as hard as we can to keep that little boy in place, for as long as we can.” She nods to her before finally stepping away, her F1 close behind.

Charlotte sighs, “This is so stupid.” Her head finally turning to glance over to the man next to her, “You’re so uncomfortable. If you want to go AAU, I’d understand.”
“No, I’m fine.” Ric shakes his head slowly, pulling up one of the high backed, vinyl covered chairs to lower himself into, “and I’m here until someone else comes up to sit with you.” He offers her a slight smile, “Are you feeling a bit more relaxed than you were before?”

The young woman shakes her head negatively, “I just want to sleep and everyone is telling me that I shouldn’t, but I’m...spent. I’m just...sore and...” She wills herself not to cry, just falling silent. “I’m sorry that you’ve somehow gotten roped into all of this...and I don’t even understand how.” Charlotte attempts to adjust her position in the bed, “but I’m thankful, Ric. Didn’t even need to bribe me with lemon cake.”

“If it’s lemon cake you want, I’ll get it for you.” Ric notices the young woman begin to smile a bit, knowing he amused her. “All things considering, I think you and Baby Dunn will be just fine.”

“I think I’m going to make him a Wolfe.” Charlotte had been thinking about it, but never actually vocalized anything, “Possibly myself as well, but I haven’t told Mum or Serena about that yet. I don’t think my Dad is going to be very happy, but I honestly couldn’t care in the least.” She holds onto the side rail, gritting her teeth after a moment, hissing through them as she has another painful contraction. She slowly breathes through it after a moment, “Can you see if Mum and Serena are at least in the building?” A tinge of worry to her voice, “Serena’s going to need stitches for her lip and...I need to make sure nothing happened to them after we left.”

“I’ll let you ask them yourself.” Ric uses his own mobile, contacting Bernie through a video conference. He hands the mobile to Charlotte, smiling a little as she already seems relieved a bit.

Bernie slides her finger across the glass, happy when she sees the image of her daughter fill her screen. “Charlotte, everything okay?” She holds her girlfriend’s hand, guiding her from the car park, “I’m sorry, I’m leading Ms. Audrey Hepburn to Keller ward so I can put a couple stitches in her lip.” She moves the phone camera to show Serena, with a thick scarf wrapped around her throat and covering her mouth, large sunglasses on top of that as well as her fur hat.

Charlotte grins even more, “Is she okay? Are you okay, Mum?” Honestly, at this point, she’s just scared. So terrified of the unknown that she hardly knows what to even do with herself. Ric’s presence helps, but he isn’t her mother or stepmother.

“Golden.” Bernie nods, “This should only take us a bit...then we’ll be up to you. Promise.” She swallows, able to see the fear in her daughter’s eyes, “I love you, Charlotte.”

That’s what makes the young woman crack. She bites her lip, giving a little nod before she ends the call quickly. Charlotte doesn’t want to make things worse. A tear makes its way down her cheek and
she turns back to her back in an attempt of hiding it from Ric, to no avail. She clears her throat a little, knowing he’s staring, “I hate this. I hate this so much.”

“What do you hate?” Ric leans forward a bit, resting his elbows on his knees as he listens to the young woman, attempting to drown out the other things going on around him.

Charlotte swallows hard, quickly wiping her face with her finger as each tear falls. “If I weren’t where I was, none of this would have happened. None of it.” Her eyes settle on the end of the bed for no real reason. “Serena was hurt…and she could have been injured even more. Anders would have never…he would have never been there if I wasn’t there.” Her face winces through a contraction, her voice offering an internal growl through it.

“The medication you’ve been given, it can take some time to work.” Ric nods, wishing he could help her more than just sitting here. He hates not being able to. “The events of today are far out of your control. If you had gone elsewhere, you would have missed Christmas with your family…and, who knows, he may have gone there looking for you regardless if you decided to go into hiding.” He lifts his head, the bruised portion of her face closest to him, “He wouldn’t have stopped looking for you.”

“Because I should have never left in the first place.” Charlotte shakes her head, “He has a brain tumor…a cancer that’s spreading like wildfire. He has, virtually, no control over his actions anymore-”

“Not your fault. He could have killed you if that were the case.”

“In sickness and in health.” Charlotte continues to stare, “We weren’t married yet, but it felt like it…I promised him that I would always take care of him…no matter what. He didn’t know he was sick. I didn’t know. He didn’t go to his GP until after I had left…” She wipes another tear, “He was…so gaunt. I hardly recognized him today.”

Ric nods a little, glancing up toward her monitors, “The key thing is for better or worse. That doesn’t include your partner abusing you.” He folds his arms, leaning back in his seat, “My daughter…was in the same predicament, but she was married to him. Luckily, she got out with my grandson. They moved to Australia.” Ric flashes a quick closed-mouth smile, “I’m very proud of her.”

Charlotte doesn’t know what to make of it, “So, I should move away with my son-”

“No, I don’t think you need to do all of that.” Ric shakes his head, “It’s just what worked best for
her. You have your mother and Serena...and your ex is more than likely going to prison for quite a while.” Looking toward the young woman’s eyes, “You don’t need to worry about him anymore. The only one you need to worry about is yourself...that way, you’re caring for your son as well.”

“You’re right.” She nods a little, glancing over to the man, “Your daughter is she-” Charlotte winces through another contraction, “is she doing much better than she was before?”

“My daughter is living.” Ric answers simply, “She’s alive, settled, and happy. I can’t ask for anything more.”

Charlotte understands. She’s always worried about others and never herself. Ric is absolutely correct. She would need to change her line of thought. The ball is her court. Protectively placing a hand against her middle, thinking about the day as a whole.

Fleur returns to the bed, “Charlotte, I need to give you a feel.” She begins to pull on her latex gloves, “Then you’re heading down to imaging. Mr. Griffin can get back to AAU-”

Ric shakes his head quickly, his arms still folded as he stands from his chair, “No, I’ll stay with her until someone else arrives. I’ll just step out of your way-”

“Ric...my brother. Can you give a ring to Darwin ward. Let Cameron know, but...tell him not to worry.” Charlotte’s voice cracks ever so slightly, making eye contact with the man next to her before Fleur finally pulls the curtain to separate the two. She knows Cam is going to be angry and he’ll probably even phone their father, but that isn’t what she wants. She remembers when Cameron would keep her out of the loop on things, like their mother going to Kiev years ago after she had just gotten used to her being back. Charlotte remembers how her father asked her to write the letter when her parents divorced because he knew that she would because she was angry, but Charlotte knew her mother didn’t deserve the words she transcribed on the page. Their entire family is constantly met with one of them attempting to hold their tongue, “No more secrets.” Charlotte mumbles to herself, following the orders of the ward’s consultant as she carefully places her feet in the stirrups at the end of the bed.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Upon being informed of his family's ordeal, Cameron rushes to be with them.

Bernie tends to her wife.

“Your Christmas went well?” Frieda smiles a little toward the young man, sitting behind the nurses station. It was rather quiet in the ward. Not many patients right away after Christmas. Their time to shine is New Years, but she never understood why. ED and AAU saw the most Christmas patients, candle burns and cuts from opening packages, that sort of thing.

“It really did, actually.” Cameron grins a little, “My sister is one hell of a cook. We weren’t totally traditional, but we were...us.” He nods, leaning his elbows against the desktop from the other side, “Mum and Serena even got engaged. Can you believe that one?”

“Well, now all your mustings toward your Step mum are founded.” Frieda finds herself smirking slightly, lifting the unit telephone once it rings. She hands it toward the doctor in front of her, watching as his face falls after a moment. He drops the receiver and she fishes it back up using the cord. “Dr. Dunn-”

“They uh...” Cameron rubs his hand against his stubble in thought, “My sister and Ms. Campbell...they were attacked at home.” He answers suddenly, the thought obviously affecting him. “Mum has her on Keller...Char’s in Maternity. Mr. Griffin is with her.” He shakes his head, “I don’t understand how...what even happened.” He starts to walk toward the stairway, not noticing the other doctor following close behind him.

“I’ll let Jac know.” Frieda nods, watching as he pauses to glance back toward her, “It’s going to be okay, Cam.”

Cam isn’t so sure of that himself. He jogs down the stairs, not understanding or knowing what he can possibly do in this situation. Otter ward houses both pediatrics and maternity, he tells himself. His mind completely blank with exception of a desire to make things better. Keller first.

“Complain all you want.” Bernie sits in her office, her partner in front of her as she stitches her lip, “It’s going to be swollen, but you already know that.” She’s careful, something that isn’t too large or terribly noticeable. “Stop sticking your tongue out. It isn’t even bleeding anymore.”
“It just feels odd being all numb.” Serena manages with an open mouth, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, darling, just stay still.” Bernie had given the woman something to relax her a bit, having noticed her shaking hands as they were in the car. She’s about to tie the stitch closed when the door to her office is excitedly pushed open, seeing her son standing there, “Cameron, how are you?”

“How am I?” Cam shakes his head, glancing to the two women. When Serena offers him a lazy hand wave, he finds himself smirking a little, having a feeling the woman would have probably taken something, “Are the two of you okay?”

“Wolfe in shining armor.” Serena pokes her finger in her girlfriend’s direction.

“Hold still, I’m nearly finished.” Bernie gently guides the woman’s face to where it was previously, tying off the last stitch and snipping away the excess. “Okay.” She offers the ice pack back to her partner, guiding the woman’s face up from leaning back. “We’re going to head up to Otter. Are you coming along?”

Cameron just stands there, “Ric called me...I didn’t know you were hurt, Ms. Campbell.”

“Just Serena, Cameron. I’m marrying your Mum. I think we can drop formalities by now.” Serena raises an eyebrow, reaching a hand out to him, smiling a little from the opposite side of her mouth when he takes hold of it. “Your Mum punched a guy in the throat and wrestled him to the ground.”

Bernie rolls her eyes, cleaning up the bandaging papers, paper basins, and removing her latex gloves, “It really wasn’t that exciting.”

“Sneaked in through the back door.”

Cam seems both amused and impressed as he glances toward his mother, still holding the woman’s hand, “Guess all those Army skills weren’t for naught.”

“Suppose not.” Bernie stands, remaining humble about the whole ordeal, per the usual, disappointed with herself for not being able to protect them in the first place. She tosses the things in the bin that need to go there, carrying the rest toward the door, “Let’s head to Otter?” Serena was a simple fix for
her, but Charlotte’s injury was a bit worse, not to mention her contractions that were causing her to worry.

“Of course.” Cameron helps Serena to her feet, letting the woman lean on him a bit, as she was a bit wobbly. They use the elevator this time and he’s surprised his mother didn’t try to take the stairs ahead of them. Charlotte was always her favorite, though she’d never admit it. She didn’t need to. It actually never bothered him as much as one would expect it to. He and his mother were more similar with their desire to see the world and fly as far away from home as possible. Their relationship has grown considerably over the past couple years, he’d speak to her weekly over the phone or through a video conferencing application. He can tell just how worried she is. “Are you okay?” Cam tilts his head to Serena.

Serena hums her approval, reaching her other hand to her partner, knowing she would take it. “Fleur would be tending to her personally. Charlotte’s going to be fine.” She ignores Cameron as he picks up her ice pack from the floor with his free hand.

“Physically.” Bernie nods a little, lacing the fingers of her left hand between that of Serena’s right hand.

“She’s stronger than you give her credit for, Berenice.” Serena lets go of Cameron’s hand, holding onto the woman’s arm more. “He uh...he tried to do...things...and she headbutted him.” When it captures the others’ attention, she turns her focus forward, nodding a little. She picks up her newly free hand, the ice pack placed back into it from the young man next to her, “She protected me from him as well.” She pauses, “Apples don’t fall far, darling.”

Bernie leans over, pressing a kiss against her partner’s temple. “Okay.” She whispers a little.

Cameron smirks a little to himself, not ever actually fully witnessing the care between the two women. Sure, there was the occasional glance, or quick cheek kiss during Christmas, but...nothing like this. The elevator doors open and he leads them for a change, “Ric said they were this way.” He catches sight of the man pacing slightly, not terribly far from the elevator space and through a doorway signifying Maternity, “Mr. Griffin.”

“She should be back up at any point now. They’ve taken her to imaging for her head.” Ric explains as the group stands in front of him, “Three centimeters dilated, but Ms. Fanshawe is betting on this medication working for her to calm the contractions...as well as bedrest, which—”

“She’s probably pretty pissed off about.” Cameron chortles softly to himself, knowing his sister well.
Bernie motions to the empty chair beside the bed, helping Serena take a seat. When she notices Ric’s alarmed face, she shakes her head a little, “Gave her something to relax her.” She won’t go into explaining anything, she doesn’t really need to, it seems Ric understands anyway. Bernie folds her arms after, looking to him. “Six stitches.” She says softly, a quick finger to her own lip.

Ric nods, his hands folded in front of him as he raises an eyebrow, “If this whole doctor thing doesn’t work out, at least we know we can moonlight as a crime fighting duo.” He hears her goose-like honk of a laugh, smirking a little to himself after.

“You made a joke!” Bernie says between laughs, bringing a hand up to pat him on his upper arm.

Cameron shakes his head a little, taking a seat at the foot of the empty bed, an amused look on his face, “Do I want to know?”

“I’ll put in in my book.” Ric nods toward the young man, “I should be taking my leave now that you all are here. I’ll be on AAU.” He accepts a thankful hug from Bernie, returning it. “Keep me posted?”

“Of course, Ric.” Bernie says into his ear, releasing him after a moment. She watches as he walks away to the elevators, sighing a little once he turns out of sight. “I owe Ric Griffin a great deal today.” Her voice low, quiet. She knows her son can hear her, but she doesn’t expand on the thought, just needing to stay strong for these people now.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Offering to stay with his pseudo step-sister, Jason drives the young woman crazy when he takes the rules laid out for him by his aunts a bit too seriously.

Charlotte is surprised when an unlikely source wants to make amends.

Chapter Notes

35 weeks.

Also, I've missed Jason a bit in this fic.

Bedrest. Bedrest isn’t fun for anyone. Especially when your mother and her partner plan to hover as much as they possibly can, even having a revolving carousel of people over the past month to babysit while they need to work. Charlotte opens her eyes a little, feeling as if she’s being watched. She turns her head, toward the foot of her bed, “Jason.”

“Yes, I’m here.” Jason steps closer, wanting to do a good job, like he promised Auntie Serena he would do. “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“No, Jason.” Charlotte carefully turns herself to her back, “Why are you watching me like I may explode?”

“I told Auntie Serena that I would.” He nods, confident. “When Greta was pregnant, she liked to play classical music to her tummy. She would say that it settled the baby. Have you tried that?”

He didn’t watch her often. Thankfully. Charlotte shakes her head a little, going to fold her arms over her chest, but stopping when she notices her shirt wet from her leaking breasts. “I haven’t tried that yet, no.” She sighs a little, “And Serena meant that figuratively, not literally about watching me.” Charlotte gently pushes herself up more to sitting, her legs over the edge of the bed.

“You aren’t supposed to get up.” Jason shakes his head negatively, moving to stand in front of her, “Only to use the toilet. Are you going to the toilet now?”
Frustrated slightly, she lifts her head to meet his eyes, “My shirt is wet, Jason. Can you see that my shirt is wet?” When she notices his subtle nod, Charlotte continues, “I need to tend to my wet shirt.” When he’s about to protest, she lifts a hand up to stop him, “Would it make you feel better if I were to tell you that I was going to toilet?”

“Then I suppose I could allow you to get up.” Jason smiles a little, knowing there would be a way around the rule his aunt made. He steps aside, “I can help you. I’m a porter at the hospital. Did you know that?”

“I did. Do you like it?” Charlotte holds onto his arm as he helps her stand. Thankfully, he doesn’t feel the need to hold onto her as she waddles over to her chest of drawers. Pulling one open, Charlotte removes her pajama shirt, quickly grabbing one of her old university t-shirts from inside the drawer. Not a university she attended, however, and she isn’t exactly certain how she acquired it in the first place. Pulling it over her large belly, she sighs when the hem sits just above her belly button. “Bloody hell.” She mumbles to herself.

“I love it there. Most everyone is very nice and I’ve made a few new friends.” Jason watches her, knowing he shouldn’t be watching, but she has her back turned to him. When she turns to face him, he tilts his head to the side, “I have some shirts here still for when I stay the night. They’re probably larger than that one. Would you like to wear one of those instead?”

Charlotte feels herself growing upset about the shirt for really no reason whatsoever, tears in her eyes as she nods pitifully. “Thanks.” She manages to answer with her cloudy voice.

“But...why are you crying?” Jason seems ever so slightly alarmed, “Are you in pain?”

“No,” Charlotte swallows, wiping an escaped tear away, “just hormones, Jason. I cried about running out of milk for tea last night. It’s just something that happens.”

“It didn’t happen with Greta.”

“Because Greta is a robot, Jason.” Charlotte snaps quickly before shaking her head, “I’m not Greta.” She opens up another drawer, obtaining the nursing bra Serena had insisted she buy sooner rather than later. Of course she was right. She makes her way through her room, to the door, leading to the hallway. It feels like he’s walking so close that he’s breathing at her neck, “Jason, please stop.” Her voice small.
Jason stands upright more, sensing that she wasn’t happy. “I’m a father. I can help.”

“I know you can. I don’t doubt that you can help, but...I’ve hardly had a moment’s peace in an entire month.” Charlotte carefully makes her way to the nursery. Most of the elves removed, save for Elinor’s within the confines of the cot. It was neutral, just in case Guinevere spent the night. She moves to the small container in the clothing cupboard, full of baby essentials that weren’t necessarily needed all at this point, removing the soft cotton nursing pads. She closes the container, turning to come face to face with Jason again. “Hey, could you go ahead and get me that shirt you mentioned? Biggest one you have. Nothing fancy, just something...comfortable. Similar to the one I have on?”

Jason offers a smile, “I can do that.” He steps away, calling out before stepping through the doorway, “Go to the toilet.”

Charlotte smiles a little, carrying her brassiere and nursing pads to the toilet. She closes and locks the door behind herself, propping her feet up on the edge of the bathtub. A moment of peace. She feels her emotions take hold, causing her eyes to fill with unshed tears as her mobile rings in her pocket. Video conference. Usually her mother or Serena. “I’m fine.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

A male’s voice. Familiar. Of course he would call today. Charlotte begins a low, humming chortle, quickly wiping the tears from between her nose and cheek, “Hello, Dad.”

Marcus studies his daughter’s face, “I...I realize now that I owe you an apology.” He leans back on his sofa, keeping his mobile at eye level. “I heard about the arrest...and how...” He pauses, shaking his head ever so slightly. “Are you okay?”

“On bedrest now, but...” Charlotte nods a little, “Mostly healed...Serena was the one to get sutures. I just had a slight concussion.” She licks her lips absently, “Mum wants me to talk to someone, but...It’s unnecessary.” She’s surprising herself at the moment, listening or even conversing with her father even the slightest bit now.

“You’re crying though.”

“Yeah.” Her chin trembles, nodding a little as the tears start up again. “Hormones and all that, I’m
Charlotte clears her throat, laughing a little at herself. “You’re doing okay, Dad?” She doesn’t have the energy or desire to be cross with him anymore. She was vindicated of his doubt, a doubt that should have never existed in the first place.

“Better now that I’m talking to you.” Marcus nods slowly, watching his daughter closely, “I would really like to see you, but...only if you’re comfortable with it.”

Charlotte flashes a quick smirk, “Yeah, okay. Not like I’ve anywhere to go. Serena’s nephew is here now, watching over me. Literally.” She runs a hand through her hair, pushing the pieces that were too short to pull back into her messy bun to rest behind her ear, “and I’m in the loo with leaky bosoms and...” She glances toward the ceiling, “Serena was right, but...I’m an idiot.”

Marcus has no idea what she’s talking about at this point, but he can tell how spent she is, “I’m going to be over soon. We can order take-away...and watch a film, maybe.” He needs to make it up to her, “Ask Serena’s nephew what he likes.” He remembers Cameron speaking of the young man.

She feels unsure of it all, but nods anyway, “I’ll let Jason know.” Charlotte offers a closed mouth smile, “See you soon.”
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Upon arriving home from work, Serena and Bernie are surprised by an unlikely visitor.

Marcus and Bernie manage a civil conversation.

Serena plans a sudden night of relaxation.

Bernie waits at the bottom of the ramp, just leading to the car park. It’s their usual occurrence. Whichever is finished first, will wait for the other. She thinks about having a quick cigarette before her partner were to see her, but then decides against it, knowing she’d hear enough about it from her daughter if she smelled even remotely like cigarette smoke. Picking her head up, Bernie notices her fiance making her way down the ambulance ramp, “Good day?”

“Well...a day.” Serena tilts her head from side to side, showing her uncertainty. “I did receive a text from Jason to say someone was over, but he didn’t go into it. Four car pile up. Multiple injuries. We could have used your trauma expertise, but I suppose no one else was in to fill your slot.”

“We could have made it work.” Bernie shakes her head, “Did anyone try calling?”

“They did, but they were quickly told by your registrar that you had a full day and couldn’t be spared.” Serena repeats what she was told. “I was about ready to just come up and trade spaces with you.” She carries her business satchel around her shoulder as they make their way to the car. “It wasn’t the easiest thing in the world, but we managed.”

Bernie smiles a little, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll head home and you can have a nice soak...and a glass of shiraz in the bath? I’ll light candles. How does that all sound?”

“Blooming lovely.” Serena mumbles, turning her head to the side to quickly peck her lips against her fiance’s before she climbs herself into the car. Bernie usually drives. She just prefers it, and Serena never argues because she doesn’t fancy driving much.

“Did you want to pick up take-away?”

“No, we have food at home. I can cobble together something.” Serena shakes her head, “Maybe we
could help Charlotte put something together for dinner some night soon. I know she misses it.”

“Not while she’s on bedrest.” Bernie shakes her head, even though she had grown used to the home cooked meals her daughter prepared each night. She’s been strict about the young woman staying in bed, however, even threatening her with the use of a bedpan if she didn’t stay put, “Or maybe we can learn something and surprise her. Sunday dinner round our’s...prepared by us.”

“Pure fantasy.” Serena smirks a little, amused with the thought. It doesn’t take them much time to reach their home, some days they’d even walk. At least, they used to. Not so much any more in case they needed to leave quickly. She spots Jason’s sedan, but notices another parked behind him. “Who is that?”

Bernie furrows her brow, instantly recognizing the automobile, “What is Marcus doing here?”

“Marcus?” Serena starts to feel herself panic ever so slightly. Not liking the feeling of having someone in her home she didn’t know was going to be there or having the ability to invite them in herself. All going back to the Boxing Day incident. “Why would Marcus be here?”

“I don’t know, darling. Let’s find out together.” She parks the car in the driveway before climbing out. “I don’t hear any arguing.” Bernie waits for her partner before stepping up to the door, using her key to gain entry. She pauses in the entryway, smiling slightly to herself.

“Laughter.” Serena whispers, setting her business satchel down near the door. She removes her coat, hat, and scarf, setting them on the coat stand before following them to the stairs, not waiting for her partner this time, who is doing the same. She quickly climbs the stairs, opening the door to her stepdaughter’s room slowly.

Charlotte relaxes in bed with Marcus next to her on one side and Jason asleep on the other. The young woman and her father eating pizza. “Stepmum.” She uses her brother’s term for the woman, quickly noticing the door opening a little. She motions to the cardboard box at the end of the bed with her free hand, “Come and have a slice.”

Serena raises her eyebrows, surprised by the scene before her, “What’s going on here?”

“Dad bought pizza.” Charlotte explains simply, her plate resting on top of her belly like some sort of tray table. “We’re watching a bit of Would I Lie to You. Lee Mack is a riot.” She motions to the television, “Come and watch.”
Bernie pokes her head in behind her partner, having caught a portion of the conversation. A part of her is happy that her daughter and ex-husband were speaking again. Though it’s been far too long, she’s happy that there is no longer any trepidation. “Any ham and pineapple?”

“You and Char are the only ones that eat it.” Marcus glances over toward his ex-wife and her partner in the doorway, meeting her eye. Something about his look symbolizes his shame over all this time. “Serena, if you don’t share the same tastes as those two, there’s mushroom and pepperoni on the other.”

“And Jason consumed one of those?” Serena smirks ever so slightly, used to the young man’s simple tastes. She glances toward his sleeping form.

“Not at first, but Char asked him to just try. I told him if he didn’t like either, I’d order him whatever flavor he wanted. He seemed to be taken with the ham and pineapple as well.” Marcus explains, “Had three slices.”

Charlotte nods, “Then he told Dad that he was getting tired and that the two of you were late-”

“That’s probably my fault.” Serena nods, knowing the others would understand, “I apologize.”

“Oh, he was fine.” Charlotte smiles a little toward her, watching as her mother squeezes past the doorway to grab a slice of pizza from the box. “I take it work wasn’t too great then.” She snorts as the plate is knocked from her mound by the inhabitant in her womb. Charlotte continues to glance up toward the women, “Someone says he’s finished his pizza.”

Marcus catches the paper plate before it is able to place any crumbs onto the duvet. “Your Mum would place whatever she could on her tummy for Cameron to kick off.”

“Oh, true story.” Bernie smirks toward her, taking a bite of her slice of pizza. She chews for a moment before continuing, “I thought for certain he would make an excellent footballer...and he did, but he just wasn’t interested in it enough.”

“He started running and never stopped.” Marcus saw his ex’s nod in agreement. He begins to collect the rubbish left behind from the pizzas, “I should be going though. I know how tired you probably are, Char.” Noticing his daughter’s downcast expression, he sighs a little, leaving the used paper plates on top of one of the boxes, “I can come back again though...if it’s all the same to your Mum...”
and Serena. I’m sure we can figure something out.”

Charlotte nods a little, trying to keep her hormonal emotions at bay. She doesn’t say anything, glancing away when he presses a kiss against her hair. She wraps her arms around herself, watching as her mother follows behind the man, leaving Serena to look at her.

“I’d better wake Jason. Get him going on home.” Serena offers, noticing the young woman begin to tear up. She sighs a little, taking a seat in the space where the young woman’s father was previously. She wraps an arm around her, “Your Dad will be back. Don’t worry.”

Nodding a little, the young woman leans against her, “I’ve just...really missed him. The real him. The him before all the lies with Anders and...” Charlotte nods a little, closing her eyes in the woman’s embrace.

“It seems like that man is back, doesn’t it?” Serena gently rubs circles over Charlotte’s upper back after a moment. She doesn’t hear the young woman reply to her, “And maybe you may change your mind about him taking an active role in his grandson’s life.” She leaves the suggestion open, not expecting any response to it. Serena leans back a little to get a better look of the young woman’s face, only to see that in that very short amount of time, she’s fallen asleep. “Poor girl.” Serena gently lies the young woman back, carefully turning her to lie on her left side. She collects the boxes of remaining pizza, carrying them from the room. She’ll get Jason going in a moment. She pauses at the top of the stairs, listening to the former partners.

“I just hope my feeble apology meant anything to her.” Marcus shakes his head, “I owe her so much...I’m just thankful she’s speaking to me again.”

Bernie leans an elbow against the banister to the stairs, “I’m glad she is as well.” Her tone honest, watching the man a moment. She can tell how ashamed he is of his actions just by the way he’s standing there. “What made you come ‘round?”

“I called to...tell her how wrong I was.” He shrugs a little, “She...seemed a bit melancholy. It wasn’t something I was expecting her to be on board with, but...I offered pizza.”

Smirking, she nods a little, “You bought her love.”

“It was for sale and I wasn’t about to pass that up.” Marcus shrugs, sliding his hands into his pockets. “She’s like you when you were pregnant. Doesn’t like to ask for help, but demands her
independence. She hates this whole...bedrest business.”

Bernie huffs a soft chortle, “Oh, I know it.” She folds her arms casually, “I was never on bedrest, thankfully, but I remember being unable to stay still in that last stretch.”

“You didn’t want to take your maternity leave until you were due.” Marcus glances toward the woman. “I had to beg you.”

“You did.” Bernie watches him, nodding a little, “I was uncomfortable...swollen ankles, but I was determined. Both times.” She finds herself smiling softly, “Even with Char kicking against my bladder all day long.” Bernie unfolds her arms, lowering herself to sit on the stairs.

“And now we’re going to be grandparents.” Marcus had been thinking about it constantly, going through some of the old photographs in the house. “Serena too.” He knows to include the woman who attempted to protect his daughter multiple times during his ex-best friend’s antics. “Thanks for tending to her, Bern.”

“Of course I’m going to take care of my daughter.” Bernie responds quietly, nodding a little. “Nothing is ever going to keep me from doing so...whether she likes it or not.” She flashes a smirk, watching as he finally leaves the house, closing the door behind him. She stays there for another couple of moments, hearing her partner behind her finally, she stands, “Sorry, were you standing there long?”

Serena nods a little, warmed that Marcus is including her, even in passing. “Long enough.” She holds up the pizza boxes as she carefully passes her girlfriend on the stairs. She pauses at the bottom, glancing back to her fiance, “I just...I suppose I’m surprised. In a good way, of course, I’d do anything for Charlotte, but...I just never thought I would hear Marcus-” She stops herself, making her way to the kitchen finally, setting the pizza boxes on the countertop, having heard her partner follow her, “admit that he was wrong.”

Bernie nods a little, edging herself against the table, “Ditto.” Her hands hold onto the edge, watching her partner. She knows the woman wanted to say something else.

After wrapping the leftover slices of pizza, and disposing of the cardboard box by folding it in such a way that it would fit in the bin, Serena turns her attention back to her partner. She moves closer to her, wrapping her arms around her waist as she leans in to kiss her tenderly, needing her closeness. She feels as Bernie moves her hands from holding onto the table, to wrapping around her back. “I love you.”
“I love you too.” Bernie mumbles into her hair, holding her tightly, “I promised you that I would run you a bath...I plan to make good on my promise.” She kisses against the woman’s temple, smiling when she looks up at her.

“Join me.” Serena raises an eyebrow, meeting her partner’s eyes, “Charlotte is asleep...and we haven’t taken a bath together since-”

“France, wasn’t it?” Bernie nods a little, sliding from the table. She holds onto her partner’s hand as they make their way back to the foyer and the stairs. “This will be fantastic.”
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Bernie and Serena's night of romance and relaxation is ruined accidentally.

Serena is embarrassed after being caught in a compromising position.

Chapter Notes

35 weeks.

Someone's birthday is on Monday. Expect a couple extra chapters. #JemmaDay

Bernie relaxes in the clawfoot porcelain bathtub, the water around them turned a gentle shade of lavender from a bath bomb she had purchased for a moment similar to this. Her fiance leans against her comfortably and she plays with the woman’s multicolored hair. “It isn’t getting too cold, is it?” She leans her head down, softly kissing the woman's wet shoulder.

“Not at all. This is positively perfect, Berenice.” Serena answers simply, her hands resting on either side of the bath. She inhales deeply, closing her eyes as her head leans back more. “Especially since it's unlikely we will get this peace once the baby arrives.”

“Shouldn’t be too bad at first. I think we will be unable to keep our eyes off of him.” Bernie nods slowly, “Marcus and I were the same with with Cameron...at least for a bit. Then, I got the urge to head back to the Army.” When she feels Serena freeze up, she continues. “Mostly because I didn't like dealing with Marcus, so...you really don't have anything to worry about.”

“You had better promise me.” Serena responds softly, reaching a her hand down to gently stroke Bernie’s thigh, which were spread on either side of her to accommodate them both.

“If we need to get away, we’ll go together.” Bernie smiles a little, wrapping her arms around her partner’s abdomen from her place behind her. “Maybe that would help us. Once Charlotte and the baby are settled, we’ll take a holiday...wherever you wish, for a week. Reckon you’d like that?”

Humming, Serena nods, settling against her partner more. “Beach or no beach?”
Bernie raises an eyebrow, “Doesn’t matter to me.” Her small smile turns into a smirk, “Though I would get to see you in a swim costume. I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t enjoy that.”

“You can see me in a swim costume anytime you would like, darling.” Serena begins to turn around in her partner’s arms, “You know, we don’t necessarily need to go somewhere to do something.” She offers, leaning in to capture the other woman’s lips, “We could stay a couple of nights at some bed and breakfast...just recharge our batteries, so to speak. Leave work and family behind while we’re there.”

“That sounds promising.” Bernie begins to grin broadly against the woman’s lips, capturing them again with her own. She pulls her closer with her thighs, needing her. “Want me to see how long I can hold my breath?”

Serena shakes her head a little, “I want to give it a go.”

The door opens abruptly, a quick surprised squeak, and it closes again. “Sorry, I...” Charlotte brings her hand to cover her eyes from outside the door, “I needed a wee and I didn’t realize you both were in there, but it’s fine. I did it out here instead.” She sighs heavily, embarrassed at herself, “I’m going to get the mop and bucket.”

Bernie begins to giggle a little, probably one of the first times Serena ever heard her do so. “Wonder if she saw your bottom.” Noticing the woman’s intense blush, she laughs even harder. “We must have forgotten to lock the door. My fault entirely.”

Serena leans her head against Bernie’s shoulder out of embarrassment. “Poor girl is probably traumatized. Years of therapy ahead of her.”

“Why?” Bernie picks her hand up from the opposite arm, gently running her nails through her fiance’s hair. “She’s just seen art...like the birth of Aphrodite...surrounded by sea foam.” She softly pecks a kiss against Serena’s shoulder again, “You’re overreacting. I doubt she’s seen anything at all...if you’re really worried about it. This bath is a bit deep.”

“She urinated on herself.” Serena points out, sitting up a bit more. She sighs a little, “Should we run her a bath?” She pulls the stopper, glancing over to her partner as the water slowly drains from under them.
“Are you going to help her out of the bath?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, seeing her girlfriend still blushing. She climbs from the tub carefully, offering her hands to help her partner out. “Shower it is, then.”

“I don’t mind if it’s other people, I’m just...” Serena says quietly, pulling the towel from the warming radiator and wrapping it around herself, “With you, that’s one thing...and even when we first started dating, I wasn’t very...” She tilts her head from side to side, “I didn’t stress about my body until after Elinor was born...and it still looks very similar to then.” Serena shrugs, “Few more wrinkles and another stone or two, but otherwise-”

“Well, I think you’re perfect.” Bernie pulls Serena close, wrapping her arms around her again, pulling her close as she rests her forehead against that of the other woman. “So, head to our room...in our bed...and I’ll be there in a few moments.” Another peck before she opens the door, the smell of antiseptic hitting her nose.

Serena steps through slowly, glancing to see the young woman standing next to the door, wet pajama bottoms and one of Jason’s old cotton sweatshirts. She never noticed before just what the young woman was wearing. She knows Bernie’s going to ask her, but she feels the need to do so first. “Do you need help?”

Charlotte leans with her back against the wall, mop handle still in her hand, listening to the pair. She thinks she does need aid, but shakes her head anyway, quickly. Too embarrassed to admit anything. “I forgot to grab other bed clothes...pajama bottoms, at least.” Her tone just above a mumble, something she’s done since she was a little girl, and she notices her mother’s subtle smirk as she leaves the bath as well.

“I’ll help you.” Bernie says simply, “Just go ahead in and-”

“I can do it myself. I don’t want to ruin your night.” Charlotte shakes her head, glancing away from them a little. “I’ll grab my bed clothes and the two of you will go on to have your wild tantric sex-”

Serena tilts her head to the side ever so slightly, glancing toward the young woman at the top of her eyes, “You know that wasn’t what we were doing.” Her ears still turn a bit red at the tips, same with her cheeks. She folds her arms across her chest, amused. However, she knows she needs to act as if she isn’t amused.

“By the way, you do have a nice arse.” The young woman giggles to herself as Serena leaves the two Wolfe women standing there, Charlotte glances over toward her mother who is giving her an unimpressed look. “What, I didn’t actually see anything...I just heard you both talking about me.
“Still, she can be a bit self conscious...same as you when you wee on yourself.” Bernie says quietly as she glances away, motioning with a thumb toward the bath, “Go ahead, I’ll get your pajama bottoms. Clean towels are in the cupboard, I washed them yesterday.”

“Multitasking maven.” Charlotte carefully waddles her way into the bath, leaving the mop handle resting against the wall. She closes the door behind herself before leaning against it, exhaling slowly.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Cameron helps his sister when the unexpected happens.

Chapter Notes

It is the birthday of our beloved Jemma Redgrave.

Because of this, I figured it should be someone else's birthday as well...and you all get a couple of bonus chapters for it.

Charlotte slowly lowers herself to the concrete covered ground, a portion of the garden, while the surrounding is covered in some flowers. She wonders if Serena has someone tend to these, or if she does so herself. Never actually taking notice of it. She carefully folds her legs under herself. It’s chilly out. If not frigid. Closing her eyes, she begins to zone out a bit.

Cameron shakes his head, thought he had heard his sister sneak to the back. He stands from his place on the sofa in the lounge, making his way to the back door, cracking it open. “Darling Charlotte, what are you doing? If Mum knew I let you up-”

“I’m thirty-eight weeks today.” Charlotte’s voice confident, even amusing herself with her tone, “Sorry, I sounded a bit like Mum just then.” She holds her hands up, “Come and help me. Thought I could meditate out here for a change, but-”

“Maybe if you put on a coat.” He shakes his head, moving closer to her. Gently, he helps her stand, pulling her up by the backs of her shoulders instead of just pulling on her arms. “How are you-”

“If you complete that statement with feeling, I will stab you.”

“Okay.” Cameron nods, “Understandable.” He follows behind his younger sister, “So, what, you’re taking yourself off of bed rest?”

“If he wants to come now, he’s safe to come now. Win-win. I could run a marathon. I could...enter a
dance competition. Watch out, Strictly, here I come.” Charlotte opens the refrigerator as she nears it, “I can cook again. It’s your lucky day, big brother.” She glances around the appliance interior, “I haven’t cooked anything in over a month. Therefore, they haven’t bought anything.” Charlotte sighs, closing the door with frustration.

“Hungry?” Cameron slides his hands into his track trouser pockets, “We’ll order whatever you like.” He casually slides across the hardwood floor with his stocking feet, “Asian, Greek, pizza-”

“Pizza.” She answers excitedly, then crouching slightly with a loud groan. “Pizza. Ham and pineapple.”

He stops what he’s doing, watching his sister intently, “Am I supposed to pretend that didn’t just happen?”

“Yes.” Charlotte nods, placing a hand on her lower hip, near the base of her belly, “I just want bloody pizza.” She moves over to the breakfast table, pulling out her own chair and lowering herself to it.

“So excited to get out of bed, how long have you been awake for?”

“Since five. My usual.” Charlotte leans back a little, moaning loudly again. “He’s…not been too kind. Think he wishes I was lying down again, but they started last night…while I was prone.” She notices the young man’s look, knowing exactly what he’s about to ask, “No, I didn’t tell them.”

“Charlotte, you’re in labor. Like…real labor and you didn’t tell Mum or Serena?” Cameron moves closer to the table, edging himself against it, directly next to his sister in order to face her. “I’m trying to remain super calm with this, but inside I’m like…freaking the fuck out.”

“Me too.” She bites the corner of her from inside her mouth as she stares out in front of her, her voice quiet.

“Have you been timing them?”

Charlotte’s tone remains calm and soft, “Every eleven minutes…so far. Been that way for the past hour…or two.”
Cameron nods slowly, comfortably folding his arms across his chest, “I know they tell you to wait until contractions are every five minutes with your first child. I went through all those classes at uni. I know.” He continues to remain calm, glancing down toward his younger sister and sensing the absolute fear through the blank look on her face. “However, you’re considered high risk. So, I really think, and we can take our time getting there, that we should head to hospital.”

She nods a little, “I knew it was coming...that’s why I took a shower this morning.” A nervous chortle leaves her lips as she finally glances up to the man. “I know you don’t want to be in the room with me while-”

“I never said that.” Cameron shakes his head slowly, “All I said was that I didn’t want to be looking down at your girly bits...especially while you’re pushing a head out through them. I can stay topside...hold your hand. That is, if you want me there.”

Charlotte smiles a little, “Yeah, I do...and um...I’ll get evaluated in case it’s...practice contractions again. I want to be admitted before the mothers are alerted and descend on our location.” She sees his nod, “Promise me you won’t call them right away? Don’t worry them if it turns out to be nothing...and if that’s the case, we’ll just come home...act as if nothing even happened.”

“I can agree to that.” Cameron nods, “Do you have a duffel prepared or whatever?”

“I want to get changed first.” Seeing her brother’s raised eyebrow, Charlotte continues, “The goldenrod colored oversized sweatshirt. It’s in the closet in my room. These black leggings are fine...my nude slip-on plimsolls are by the front door.” They were her common shoe and she found them most comfortable outside of slippers now. When her brother stands, she continues, “My bag is in the closet as well. Neon yellow. I won’t lose it, or forget it. We’ll just leave it in the car.”

Cameron smiles to himself as he makes his way to the hall, then ascending the stairs. He manages to grab the young woman’s mobile and tablet computer, knowing she’s going to want to occupy herself during her time in Otter wing’s maternity ward. He obtains the sweatshirt and the duffel from the closet, looping it onto his shoulder. Opening the door to return to the ground floor, he hears another loud yell of pain from his sister. “Char?” He rushes to her, seeing her standing still in the hall, “You okay?” It looks as if she’s wet herself, the black leggings just a different shade by her crotch, but he doesn’t want to draw attention to it.

Charlotte nods quickly, her hand bracing herself against the hallway wall, “I think my waters just broke.”
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

An attempt of hiding from their mother and her girlfriend proves to be futile for Cameron and Charlotte when Jason spots them.

Ric is eager to notify his friend of news.

“I just don’t understand why you brought me up through the employee entrance for this.” Charlotte calmly exhaling as they wait for the elevator, “Mum and Serena could see us…and we both know they would freak.” She keeps a hand on the side of her belly, feeling the baby’s head in her palm, just beneath her skin. In the upper part of her belly, knowing he should be in the lower portion.

“Because we’ll get there faster this way.” Cameron rests his hands on the handles of the wheelchair, the strap of the duffle bag casually across his upper body. “Want a tea or coffee since we’re down here? Might be a while for you.”

“I’m not amused, Cameron.” Charlotte clamps her mouth closed, biting her lips together with her teeth inside her mouth as she groans loudly, attempting not to draw attention to herself. “You get yourself coffee, you arsehole.” She doesn’t mean it negatively, just their usual friendly bickering.

“Never.” Cam smirks a little, amused by his little sister. “Just breathe slowly, Char. You’re actually doing really great.” He readies to push the wheelchair once the elevator door opens, only to be met with his surrogate step-brother, “Jason, hey. Really good to see you.”

Jason tilts his head toward his shoulder, “Do you need to go to Auntie Serena? You’ll get the best care there. I can push you. It’s my job.” He steps aside as Cameron pulls the wheelchair onto the lift, “Are you in labor, Charlotte?” His tone has concern in it, even though he isn’t very good at reading emotions.

“Me? No, no.” Charlotte shakes her head quickly, even though she’s still feeling the contraction as the door to the lift closes, “No, we’re on our way up for an appointment. Every week now. Fleur’s orders.” She could scream, everything is telling her to scream, but she’s able to maintain her composure.

“She delivered Guinevere.” Jason nods, “Ms. Fanshawe is a very good doctor.” He states simply, his hands casually at his sides. Jason smiles a little only going up a couple floors before the doors open,
“This is my stop. I hope your appointment goes well.” His tone honest and he offers a kind smile toward the siblings as he steps off.

Cameron waves a hand to wave to him a little, exhaling when the doors close again. “Well, that was Keller. Let’s hope Madre is in theater...and Jason believes our story.”

“He might. He’s seen me before during my other ones. Since the bedrest was ordered, Mum and Serena would see that a porter would push me around. Like, going out of their way for it. Jason even just stayed with me one day, pushing me wherever I wanted to go. Don’t know how...normal that is though.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, inhaling and exhaling slowly as the contraction subsides.

“Good then.” Cameron finally steps off the lift once it reaches their floor. He’s glad the ward consultant catches sight of them almost immediately. “Ms. Fanshawe.” He smiles toward her as the short statured specialist nears them.

Fleur grins broadly, seeing the look on the young woman’s face, “Go time, eh?” She raises an eyebrow, “Is he still breech?” Seeing the nod from the young woman, she continues, “Good then. Let’s get you one of our finest gowns and make you as comfortable as we can. I’ll be in to give you a once over, and we’ll talk about our options.”

“Okay.” Is all Charlotte can figure to say, her voice low and quiet. She was not expecting this today. Not in the least. It isn’t as if she doesn’t want this to happen today, she was just wishing they’d be told to go on home and wait a bit longer, but with her water breaking...there was no more skirting around it.

“I’ll help you. I promise I won’t look at anything...mostly because I don’t want to see any of it.” Cameron leans down, speaking quietly into her ear as he pushes her in the direction the consultant motions to, “Room to yourself? Lucky.” He tries to lighten the mood, maybe even getting his sister to smile a little bit.

Fleur watches the pair for a moment, retreating to the nurses’ station. “Leave a message for Werewolf on Keller and Serena Campbell on AAU that their daughter is currently in my trenches, please.” She speaks to her head unit nurse. Smiling a little that all her hard work was about to come to a head today, almost literally.

Donna takes the message from the other unit nurse, unable to keep an excited grin from her face. “She’s currently in theater, but I will let her know immediately once she’s out.”
Ric glances up from standing at the nurses’ station desktop, shifting through a patient file. He catches the absolute joy on his close friend and co-worker’s face. “Good news, I assume?”

“Great news, but I don’t want to disrupt Ms. Campbell’s surgery...I know it seemed like a rather delicate procedure.” The patient had a significant vascular injury, which was Serena’s bread and butter, yet it still required her full attention. When Ric raises his brow for her to continue, Donna obliges, “Charlotte’s in labor upstairs. Ms. Fanshawe just had someone call.”

He starts to smirk a bit, “That’s great news.” Ric nods, “if it were any other surgery, I’d have taken over for her, but...she needs to be the one to do this one.”

“I know, I wasn’t implying anything.”

“Never said you were...I just wish I could anyway,” Ric closes the folder, making eye contact with the woman in front of him, “Have someone wait outside the theater in order to inform her immediately upon completion.” When she nods, he finally walks away from the desk, toward his office.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Serena rushes to help her partner's daughter, but finds herself feeling overwhelmed.

Cameron does the only thing he can do for his nephew while his sister is in recovery.

Bernie can't get enough of her new grandson.

Serena quickly makes her way to Otter after hearing Bernie is still in theater on Keller. Someone needs to be with Charlotte besides Cam. Memories flood her mind of both her difficult pregnancy with Elinor, as well as the birth. Her mother was there, but Edward didn’t come until after...properly sloshed. She stands in the doorway, taking in the sight before her.

Cameron sits in a high backed chair, without his shirt or undershirt. Small infant pressed against his chest, covered in a hospital blanket. He lifts his head when he notices the woman’s teal tunic in the doorway, “Already a chick magnet like your Uncle Cam, Wolfe Cub.” His voice gentle as he beams toward the woman. “Char’s still in recovery. Emergency cesarean, but they said skin to skin contact was the best thing I could do for him while she was taking her time waking up.”

She nears the young man, tears brimming her eyes, “Bernie’s going to be disappointed she missed this.” Serena crouches a bit, placing a hand on the babe’s back, noticing the newborn’s open eyes, “Look at you, Bright Eyes. Welcome to the world.” Serena swallows, attempting to keep her emotions at bay as she just studies the baby, “I’m surprised they left you both in here alone...without supervision.”

He holds up his wrist, showing his identification bracelet, “Well, not only do I work here, but they considered me a birthing partner when we entered. Nurse threw this on just as Char was being wheeled to theater.” Cameron smirks a little, “Do you want to give it a go? I’ve been sitting here with him for,” He lifts his wrist to check his watch, “Maybe twenty minutes so far. Scores were fine. Eight pounds and eleven ounces...fifty-four centimeters long. Big chap.”

“Big nameless chap.” Serena raises an eyebrow, glancing over the rest of him, dark fuzz covering his scalp, “Did Charlotte mention any names before going into theater?”

“No, not a one.” Cameron sighs softly, “You know, I never really got to hold many babies in my travels. I mean, of course I’ve helped many people with children, but...this is different. Do babies always...I don’t even know what my question is. He’s just...perfect.” He pauses, “Do babies always feel like this?”
“Yes, Babies are known to do that.” Serena nods slowly, “Render one speechless.”

“Well, you’re his Nan, right? This lad gets to go home with you and you get to hold him whenever you’d like.” Cameron starts to smile again, “and you’ll be the one to sneak him sweets and...give him cuddles when Char isn’t available...or even when she is.” He notices the woman next to him growing teary eyed, “And he’s incredibly lucky for it.”

Serena nods a little, finally standing upright and glancing away from him to quickly wipe her tears with her left hand. She clears her throat, “I’m the lucky one.” Her eye catches berry colored scrubs racing down the hallway, causing her to smirk a little. “Here comes Gran.” She moves over, standing in the doorway again.

Bernie slows down to a walk in order to catch her breath, “You’re here.”

“You were in theater.” Serena watches her partner, “Charlotte’s still in recovery, so she should be back at any point now.” Folding her arms across her chest, she casually lifts her hand to finger the charm of her silver necklace. “Bernie...he’s absolutely perfect.”

“Why...why is she not-” The blonde begins to shake her head, placing her hands on her hips, the long sleeves of her base layer top, located under her scrub top, pushed up just under her elbows. Bernie nervously clears her throat, “Emergency cesarean?” Seeing the subtle nod of her partner, watching as the woman steps aside, she sees her son sitting there with her grandson on his chest and she wills herself not to cry at the sight.

“And now here’s Gran. Just like your Nan, she’ll sneak you sweets and cover for you when you get in trouble so that your Mum doesn’t find out. She also smells really nice for some reason, even after she works all day long.” Cameron says quietly to the babe on his chest, “She’ll tell you stories of peach stones that aren’t going to make sense at the time, but when you’re older...you’ll totally understand.”

Bernie gently brings her hand up to cover her mouth, finally letting a tear fall. She moves in more, leaning her hands down to carefully remove the baby from her son’s bare chest when Cam offers him to her. “Hello there.” Her voice clouded with emotion as she gently wraps the newborn in the hospital provided blanket. She finds herself swaying from foot to foot like she did with her own children, and Guinevere when she stays the night. “Cameron, he looks like you when you were born.”
“Minus the cone head.” Cameron stands from the chair finally, retrieving his cotton t-shirt from the back of it and quickly pulling it back on. When he notices the playful scowl from his mother, he continues, “Though I appreciate all the effort you gave to bring me into the world, a coned head for a few weeks was the least of my worries.”

“Much better.” Bernie smirks a little, backing against the wall when the bed containing her daughter is pushed to the doorway, returning her to the room from being in recovery. She knows the young woman is probably still probably a bit groggy. “Charlotte.” Bernie also knows that her daughter probably hasn’t met her own son yet.

“I’m going to text Jason. Let him know what’s going on.” Serena nods, reaching into her pocket to retrieve her mobile.

Charlotte opens her eyes a little, languidly smirking toward her mother. “Hey.” She swallows, comfortable. The vision of her mother in front of the window catching her eye. “How does he look?”

“He looks perfect.” Bernie nods, still cradling her grandson in her arms. She glances around to the staff members, watching as one of the nurses apply a blood pressure cuff to the young woman’s arm. “Want to meet him?” She takes a careful seat on the side of the bed, knowing her daughter is still recovering from surgery, “He’ll probably be hungry soon enough as well.”

Reaching out, Charlotte gently edges back the blanket from around the baby’s face, getting a better look at him, “Hello there.” She feels her own eyes begin to well up with tears. “You were right. He is perfect.”

Cameron follows Serena when he notices her leave the room quickly, a little too quickly for his liking. He watches her facing toward the wall, her hands on her hips. “Stepmum.”

Serena swallows, hearing the pet name from the young man. She clears her throat after a moment, “Oh, go ahead back in. I’m just...letting Jason know-”

“Except there isn’t a mobile in your hand anymore.” He watches her intently, “and it sounds like you’re crying, but not those same tears that Mum and Char are crying.” Cameron places his hands to his hips, having grown closer to the woman during the time his mother was away, and even after, “I know this is probably harder for you than when Jason was in with Greta. Are you okay?”

Turning her head to her right hand side, keeping her back toward the young man, “I’m fine,
“You aren’t though.” Cam moves closer to her, cautiously wrapping his arm around her upper torso. “And it’s okay.” He embraces Serena better when she turns in to lean her head against his shoulder. “It’s totally okay.” Cameron says quietly in her ear, hearing the woman finally break down.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Charlotte realizes it may be time for her to leave the house.

Serena finally holds Cole after being afraid to do so since his birth.

Chapter Notes

Charlotte rests on the sofa, feeding her son from her breast. Her head leaned back as she has fallen asleep, though the boy secured by pillows around her. They had been home for a couple weeks at this point and managed to find a sort of rhythm. She doesn’t hear the front door open, or Serena enter.

Serena sets her business satchel onto the floor, her coat onto the hanger, as well as her furry hat. She pauses as she passes the lounge, noticing the boy and his mother. She hasn’t been able to hold him since they arrived back home. Sure, she would look at him while Charlotte or Bernie tended to him, but...something within her was terrified to hold him. She bites her lip a little, moving near the young woman. She carefully takes a seat next to her, touching her bicep, “Charlotte.” Her voice gentle, not wanting to startle her.

Opening her eyes wide, not realizing she had dozed off, Char blinks, “I’m up.” She answers quickly,
glancing over to see Serena sitting next to her, and her son still feeding from her, “I wonder if this is what cows feel like.”

She huffs a soft chortle, nodding a little, “I used to think the same thing when Elinor was small. She wouldn’t feed from me, though. I would need to pump for every single one of her bottles.” Serena smiles sadly, “You’re lucky he isn’t so picky.”

Charlotte hums, nodding, “I’m lucky for other things. This is just him being a fat little bugger.” She smirks a little, as she glances down, noticing the babe begin to move his face away from her. She lifts him to her shoulder, gently rubbing his back after covering her naked breast, “Can we talk?”

Serena nods, casually folding her arms. The baby looks to her and she feels herself quickly looking away, “You know you can always talk to me, Charlotte.”

“I don’t want you...making your decisions about Cole and I because I’m Mum’s daughter...I want you to make them because you believe they’re the right decisions for you and your...mental well-being.” Charlotte says carefully, hearing the baby’s soft burp from his place on her shoulder. “If it’s too hard for you, Cam offered to have us stay with him-”

“No, no...you don’t need to do that.” Serena shakes her head, swallowing.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable in your own home, Serena.”

“I understand that.” She slowly glances over to the young woman, “When Guinevere was born, it was different. I only somewhat knew Greta. I knew Jason loved her and she loved him, but I...” Serena pauses, attempting to find the words, “I didn’t bond with her like I have with you. Not that I didn’t try, but...she and I are two very different people and it’s okay. We’re comfortable in our differences. Doesn’t mean I don’t get along with her, I do, but she isn’t you.” Her tone meaningful, “Over the past few months, you and I...we’ve been through a great deal together. I’ve...grown to think of you as my own.” She has tears brimming her eyes, “and I feel really guilty about that.”

Charlotte has tears in her eyes as well, “I understand why you feel guilty, but I don’t think it’s founded.” She shakes her head, “We...you and I, we’ll always be connected. In more ways than just you marrying my Mum.” Char brings the boy down from her shoulder, holding the babe in her hands for him to look up at them. “You saved me, Serena. I would have went back with Anders while I was in hospital if it weren’t for you putting a stop to it. You listened to me vent my frustrations with him after we came back from the grocer...remember? He followed us.”
'How can I forget?'

"And you tried to protect me when Anders forced his way into your home-"

"You headbutted him." Serena argues, "we did a bit of protecting one another that day."

"You have a scar from it." Charlotte sighs softly, "You even made sure I was safe, healthy, and happy when Mum wasn’t here. You didn’t need to do that, but you did." When the other woman doesn’t respond, she continues, “and, even though you feel as if you should be guilty for feeling like I’m your own...I refuse to feel that way when you feel, to me, like you were always supposed to be one of my parents in the first place.” It garners Serena’s attention more, “and Cole calling you Nan isn’t because you’re getting married to Mum, it’s a title you earned. Just like Mr. Griffin has earned the title Uncle Ric .”

Serena huffs a soft, sad chortle to herself. “He spoke of popping over later.”

“As he should. He waited with me in Otter on Boxing Day, to see if I was in labor. I miss him.” Charlotte smiles to herself, “However, I’d like for you to try holding Cole before Mr. Griffin does.”

Licking her lips, Serena glances down toward the babe, who seems to be staring at her. He’s so alert, like Ellie was when she was a newborn. Still has those blue eyes as well. She clears her throat a little, knowing he should be seen as his own person and she needs to stop linking him to her feelings of Elinor as a baby. She did the same with Guinevere, but the girl didn’t live with her and it was a lot easier to have her in small doses. Cole was around all the time, and not going anywhere, anytime soon. Serena nods a little, carefully taking the baby into her arms as his mother offers him over. Tears brim her eyes as she looks down at him.

“I’m going to get started on dinner. Chicken Teriyaki Stir-fry. Just prep work, really. If you decide you’re finished, just let me know. We can put him in his bouncer on the table in the kitchen.” Charlotte stands slowly, letting Serena have her own moment with the babe, knowing it’s probably what she needs.

Serena lifts her right hand to gently stroke over his dark peach fuzz hair as he lays in her left arm. “Handsome boy.” She says softly, earning a tired smile from the baby. “You do know that, don’t you...” She brings her hands to his milk-filled belly, stroking it gently with her nails. “I’m sorry this has taken me so long. Not much of a Nan, am I?”
She clears her throat a little, “Truth is, having you here...brings up a great deal of memories about your Auntie Elinor...and I bet she would have thought the world of you.” Serena lifts him up to the center of her chest, on his belly. She’s surprised when he holds his head up and she supports it while he lifts to look at her face, “So strong, aren’t you?” Serena grins a bit, “Charlotte.” She calls gently.

Charlotte finishes cutting the carrots for the stir-fry, setting her knife down, she makes her way to the hall, then to stand in the doorway to the lounge. “Yeah?” She lifts her head, seeing her son trying to look at her stepmother, “First time he’s done that.” An amazed smirk starts to spread across her face.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? He’s figuring you out.” Charlotte doesn’t move closer for fear of disrupting the bonding that seems to be taking place, “Or maybe he’s remembering. Voices do that. I know he recognizes Mum’s and my own voices already. He’s probably thrilled to hear from you again.”

Serena nods a little, glancing down to the boy. “Is that what it is, Cole? You recognize my voice?” Seeing another gummy smile, she thinks of it as an affirmation. She lets out a relieved laugh, soft and quick. “I don’t know what I was thinking...not holding him...”

“You were protecting yourself.” Charlotte removes her mobile from her back pocket, “No one could ever fault you for that.” She moves closer to them, taking a picture with her mobile of Cole glancing up toward Serena, with what seems adoration. “See? He loves his Nan.”

“The feeling is mutual.” Seeing the young woman walk away again, she focuses on the boy again. “And I mean that wholeheartedly.” Serena grins as the boy tiredly lets his head back down to rest on her chest, she gently strokes along his back. “I’m your Nan...and you’re my grandson.” Her chin trembles a little, but she wills herself to contain her emotions, “and I will always be here for you.”
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

After Serena realizes how ridiculous she was being in regards to her relationship with both Charlotte and Cole, she lets herself relax a bit.

Bernie tries to get the ball rolling in relation to her upcoming nuptials with Serena.

Chapter Notes

There's a small shout out to another (way more popular) fic around these parts that I particularly find adorable. Make sure to comment below if you recognize it. Show it some love!

Serena gently sways around the kitchen, baby carrier strapped around her with Cole comfortably padded within it, staring up at her. “Honestly, little mister, I’m not entirely certain why you’re still awake. I promised your mother that I would look after you while she caught some much needed rest, which is what I’m doing.” She moves over to the countertop, lifting her mug of tea into her hand, carefully taking a sip. The babe stares up at her, causing her to smile a bit. “Yes, I know. It probably has been a very tough day for you. Tell me all about it.” She acts as if the boy speaks, though he’s far too young for it just yet.

Bernie stands just before the doorway, smiling warmly to herself as she listens to her grandson and her partner speaking with one another. Serena acts as if she hears the boy’s thought process and understands every word. Bernie is living for it.

“Did she really? She switched you to the other side and you weren’t even ready?” Serena continues, encouraging the babe to keep his attention. “And now she’s gone off to sleep and left you here with your Nan. Well, I take a bit of offense to that, Mr. Wolfe.”

Stepping in more, Bernie stands in the doorway finally, beaming toward her partner. “I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by it.”

Serena jumps a little, turning to see her partner, “I don’t know how you do that. You’re the only one that is able to enter this house with, virtually, no sound.” She welcomes a peck of a kiss when her fiance nears her, “Would you like me to warm your dinner? Stir-fry today.”
“Oh, I can get it. You continue with him. What else does he have to say?” Bernie teases her, reaching a hand over to stroke over her grandson’s peach fuzz hair, “I’m intrigued.”

Giving her fiance a playful scowl, Serena glances back down to the babe, “Charlotte seems to think he recognizes our voices. Not that it’s unheard of or unbelievable, but I just...didn’t think he would care about me. He turns when he hears Charlotte, of course, but...he just...” She shakes her head a little, “There’s something about the way he looks at me that I think her hypothesis is totally correct. All three of us...and Cameron, probably. Jason needs to spend a bit more time, but Cole will recognize him soon enough as well, hopefully.”

Bernie raises her brow, “You seem more relaxed than you’ve been lately.” She moves away from them, reaching out and opening the refrigerator, obtaining the plate her daughter would leave if either she or Serena were working late, covered in clingfilm.

Serena knows why she’s been feeling that way, but shrugs anyway. “Something about babies.” She nods a little, “I told Charlotte we would tend to him tonight...let her get a bit of sleep.” When her partner has a surprised look on her face, she feels the need to continue, “I placed the travel cot in our room...the one Charlotte had in her room.”

“She only has that there for her lazy nightly feedings.” Bernie smirks to herself, “are you sure you’re up for that?”

“I’ve...neglected him for too long.” Serena feels tears in her eyes, “I owe him...and her. I owe them both.”

“You don’t owe anyone anything, Campbell.” Bernie removes the clingfilm, sliding the dish into the microwave. “I have no objections toward tending to him, you know I love it, but...I want you to be comfortable doing it. Not feeling as if you have no choice to.”

“He’s funny...and beautiful. When he looked up to me earlier...” Serena glances down, noticing the boy was sleeping now, but smiling in his sleep. “I realized how much of a miserable cow I have been...especially since I was so welcoming and...comfortable with Gwen immediately.”

Listening to the humming of the microwave, she moves up behind her partner, wrapping her arms around her from behind. Bernie gently sways with her, knowing Serena was doing so because of the baby strapped to her chest, but she finds it endearing. She gently kisses her fiance’s shoulder, “If you need to talk about it, I’m always here. You know that.”
Serena nods, lifting a hand to stroke Bernie’s arm wrapped around her. “You know, he has your nose...and eyes.” She finds this comfortable and she could probably sleep with the boy strapped to her all through the night if given the chance. “Those photographs you’ve shown me of when you were a child with your father...he looks remarkably like you.”

Bernie huffs a quick laugh, “Well, maybe these looks will work as well for a man as they have for his mother and myself.” She pulls away from her partner to retrieve her food, only to be pulled back in before she’s able to completely let go, straight to Serena’s eager lips. She’s careful not to crush the babe between them.

She brings her hand up to softly touch her partner’s face as she intensifies the kiss before breaking it. Serena grins broadly, “I’m turning a new leaf.”

“Okay.” Bernie nuzzles her nose against Serena’s, giving one last quick peck before backing away again. “I’m all for turning leaves.” She tugs open the microwave door, hissing at the hot plate, “What is your new leaf?” She loudly places it onto the kitchen island in front of her, seeing the noise startle the baby a little. Sorry , she mouths.

“Just...stop living in the past.” Serena answers honestly, “With...everything. With Cole and Gwen, with Jason and your children...even with you. Just be present in this moment. Think of the future and what it means for us. Like, do we want to travel? Do we want to buy a holiday home? Do we set up our wills? Do we want a large wedding or something small with just our family?” She asks her questions slowly as they come to her, her voice alone lulling Cole back to sleep. “What about tomorrow or the next day?”

Bernie doesn’t know how to answer her, or even if she should answer her. She pulls open a drawer, retrieving a fork and stabbing it into her stir-fry. She brings the forkful of food to her mouth, quickly pushing it inside. “Well?”

“Well?”

“Large wedding or small wedding?” Bernie asks, mouth full of teriyaki chicken stir-fry, “This is really bloody good.”

Serena releases a breath she wasn’t aware she was holding, “I don’t know.” She feels herself starting to calm down a bit more, “What do you want?”
“Our family is important to be there...and some of our friends. Ric, Dom and Lofty, possibly Donna, Sasha...Fleur?” Bernie begins to smile a bit, “Ric asked me to apologize as well for not making it over today. Said he shot you a text, but you didn’t respond. AAU was swamped once you left. Shoddy craftsmanship on a house...floor caved in, so they had that going for them. Got to put my Trauma expertise to good use.”

Slowly nodding, Serena carefully takes a seat at the kitchen table. “What were you facing?”

“Broken bones, internal injuries galore. Your favorite F1, Dr. Faulkner, was actually quite spectacular in that instance. Trauma may be her thing. Something where you need to think on your feet and out of instinct, not give much thought. Just do what needs doing.” Bernie nods, explaining, “She offered me drinks, but how could I possibly accept knowing the two of you were here waiting for me.”

Serena rolls her eyes a little, “then keep her on Keller with you.”

“Maybe I will.” Bernie grins, noticing her fiance’s playful scowl, “Maybe I’ll invite her to the wedding.” She starts to honk her distinctive laugh when her partner grumbles, “Which really doesn’t matter because I’ll be marrying the most beautiful woman there.”

Blushing, Serena glances away, a smirk playing at her lip, “Flatterer.” She listens to the baby begin to softly snore, “I’m going to take him up and get him changed, as well as myself. I’ll meet you up there.”

Glancing to the wall clock, Bernie nods watching her leave the room. A part of her wonders what they would have been like together as parents, raising children together. She wonders if she would have enjoyed motherhood more. If she’d want to be there. She’ll live vicariously with Cole while he and Char stay here. Yeah, she’s sure they’d have made great parents if they were raising their children together from the start.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

A face from the past continues to haunt the present. Will Charlotte be able to contain herself?

Cameron tries to talk his sister out of a terrible decision.

Chapter Notes

7 weeks. Wolfe cub continues to be hella adorable though.

Extra chapter for the week because...why not?

Charlotte steps off the elevator to Darwin ward, having just finished up with Cole’s first real check up on Otter. She holds the twelve-pound babe on her chest, his head upright and alert as he peeks over her shoulder, appearing older than he actually is. Smirking when she sees the face of the familiar man before her. “Hello, Fletch.” They had seen one another in passing many times while she was staying on AAU with Serena, developing a sort of friendship.

“Look at your boy there.” Fletch reaches a hand out to affectionately shake the baby’s foot, “What was his name again?”
“Cole.” Char nods slowly, letting him take the baby when he holds his hands out. “You said you have four, right?”

Fletch nods slowly, “They’re all growing like weeds though. They’re nice when they’re this small. Can’t talk back just yet.” When the babe studies him, offering him a tired smile, he chuckles a bit, “Uncle Cameron should be about here somewhere.”

Frieda moves back toward the nurses’ station after speaking with a patient in the secluded special care room, her face lightens ever so slightly. “He has your eyes.” She can’t help but smirk, something that isn’t seen often with her demeanor. “You must be Charlotte.” She nods toward the woman, “your brother has shown me many pictures of your son on his mobile.”

“Good ones, I hope?” Char raises an eyebrow.

“One of him with his shirt off and your son as a newborn. I think he’s quite proud of it.” Petrenko nods, folding her arms casually over her chest, “Shows as many people as possible.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s photos of him with his bare chest and not me.” She smirks a bit, offering her hand to the raven haired woman, “You know me, but I don’t know you. I’m sorry.”

“Frieda.” Petrenko nods, taking the younger woman’s hand to shake, “Cameron seems like a very protective brother.”

“Four years older than me...” Charlotte nods, “I’m sure you can draw your own conclusions.”

Fletch glances between the woman, “See, now it’s just us men, Cole. We need to stick together...these women will take you down, no matter what.” When the babe makes noises to him, he nods, “Exactly. Mutual respect is paramount, but...let’s not sugarcoat things. Women will drive you insane.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Frieda glances over toward the man, then down to the babe, “Don’t listen to a word he says. He’s still single...and for good reason.” She pauses, “Besides the four kids.”

Cameron steps out from the care room, next to the desk, filled with four beds and allowing them to
treat patients with similar ailments. “Char...Hey...What’s up?” There isn’t really a way he could make this less awkward. A flash of worry bolts through his eyes and he knows his sister can probably see it. “Surprised you didn’t go round to Mum.”

“Well, we’ll get there. You were first.” Char gives her brother a cordial peck on the cheek. “Someone weighs twelve pounds and is bursting off his growth charts for his age.” She gives her son’s belly a playful poke with her index finger, hearing him make a delightful squeal.

“Good job, Cole.” Cam gives the baby a quick grin. He’s trying his hardest not to just take the boy from the head of nursing and tickle him, but there’s something else on his mind. “Char, mind if I talk to you for a moment.”

“Oh, go ahead.” Fletch nods, handing the baby over to Frieda, “We can watch him for a few.”

“Thanks.” Charlotte nods to the pair, stepping off with them, walking next to her brother, “What’s going on? Hangover?” Her tone dry, noticing the dark circles under her brother’s eyes. “You look like hell, Cam. You really should be careful. I need you around to be a positive male role model to Cole.” Not wanting to mention her father, as he had only seen his first grandson twice in the seven weeks the boy has been alive, surprising her.

“Yeah.” Cameron answers dismissively, just strolling slowly with his sister, “Listen, you need to go.”

“Oh.” Charlotte pauses, standing still a moment, “Are you going to get in trouble for-” She stops when he shakes his head negatively, “Cameron...”

“I really can’t...” Cam swallows, clearing his throat after. “Look, I haven’t told Mum or Serena, I wouldn’t be telling you if you hadn’t chose to come up here today.” When she continues to look at him, he continues, “Anders is back in our specialty care room...on this floor. Which is why you need to go...”

She can feel tears seep into her eyes, placing her hands onto her hips, “Where is he?”

“No, I don’t want you seeing him. Don’t give him that satisfaction.” Cameron glances away, not wanting to see his sister cry. “So, you need to take Cole and...at least get off this floor. Go to Mum, go to Serena...wherever, as long as you aren’t here.”
“Is he in police custody?” Charlotte takes her hands from her hips, folding them across her chest. When the man seems confused, she continues, “I told him he could see his son once, as long as he didn’t try to weasel his way out of custody...and if he was following rules-”

“Don’t do that to yourself, Char.”

“It isn’t about me. He’s going to die soon, isn’t he?” She sees her brother sigh, only confirming her statement. “Okay then.” Charlotte begins to walk back to where they were before.

“Just go to Mum and Serena, please.” Cameron attempts again.

“I don’t go back on my word.”

“What about Cole? What if he hurts him, eh?” Cam shakes his head, ever so slightly amused by his sister’s headstrong, fearless gait and its resemblance to their mother’s, “You’ll never forgive yourself if he hurts him.”

“If he’s in police custody, he’ll be cuffed to the bed. At least one constable nearby. I’ll talk to him first, see where his head is.” Charlotte swallows, actually quite nervous about the whole thing, but not wanting to admit that in the slightest. She attempts to push down her emotions, noticing her brother as he continues to walk with her, “Cameron-”

“This is a stupid idea.” Cam tries to stand in her path, attempting to stop her. “Do you want me to list the ways in which this is a dumb idea for you?”

“You didn’t live through it, Cam. I did. I’ve seen him at his best and I’ve seen him at his worst...I have scars, physical and mental, that will be with me for the rest of my life from him.” Char swallows, her voice softening, her eyes glassy. “I owe him nothing...but, I owe my son the world. If I take just one picture of him in his father’s arms...I think it would mean a great deal to him when he’s older.”

Cameron nods a little, understanding her reasoning, if only a little bit. “I’m not leaving you alone with him.” It wasn’t a suggestion or a question of any sort, it was a done deal as far as he was concerned. He sees his sister’s subtle nod and moves to retrieve the baby from Frieda, having told the woman about his connection with the patient previously. He doesn’t say anything, it’s almost as if she just understands. However, he stops when his sister gives him a look, signalling him to stay put.
Charlotte moves into the doorway of the one room with a constable standing outside. She looks through the window, seeing the man, now bald, resting in the bed. He’s mostly wasted away, hardly recognizable. Quickly glancing to her brother, “Stay out here.” She clears her throat as she’s allowed entry to the room, keeping her arms folded over her chest. She stands at the foot of his bed, just staring at the rising and falling of his chest. A part of her will always love this man, regardless of how much he’s hurt her, and she doesn’t understand why. She never has. When he opens his eyes, she finally speaks, “You look like shit.”

“I feel it.” Anders nods slowly, smirking tiredly as he looks her up and down. “You look great, Char.” He pauses, “I’m guessing you had the baby?” When the woman nods subtly, he continues, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte licks her lips, glancing away, toward the window leading to the outdoors. She clears her throat, “His name is Cole...Cole Wolfe.”

“Your Mum’s name?”

“Mine as well now.” Her arms fall to her sides, “She doesn’t know just yet. I’ll tell her for the next holiday.” Charlotte pauses a moment before continuing, “I’m a woman of my word, Andy. If you’d like to see him...”

“No.” Anders swallows, shaking his head, “No, I don’t. He’s not my son. He’s yours.” He has tears in his eyes, but refuses to acknowledge their formation, “I don’t deserve him...and I don’t need him to know me. Not really.” He focuses on the woman again, “He’s really lucky to have you for a Mum, though...it’s what you always wanted.”

“No, it isn’t.” Charlotte folds her arms again, quickly wiping a stray tear that has found its way down her cheek, “No, what I wanted was...a family.”

“And do you not have that?” Anders’ voice raises a bit, “A place you feel safe and wanted? A stable home for your son?” He watches her, “Charlotte, I will always love you, but loving someone means wanting the best for them...and that isn’t with me. I know that. Believe it or not...I want what’s best for you and your son. This is just my way of doing it.”

She had never thought of it that way. Char nods sadly, “Good luck, Anders.” Her voice soft, just somewhat above a whisper. Taking one last look at him, she finally steps back through the door, knowing this is probably the last time she’s ever going to see the man. Seeing her brother not far from the door, she glances over to him, “I’ll um...I just need a few minutes, okay?”
“Of course.” Cameron watches as his sister makes her way toward the employee break room.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Upon losing track of his sister, Cameron and an unlikely source attempt to find her.
Donna tends to Cole until one of his grandmothers becomes available.

Chapter Notes

I really, truly wasn't going to post another chapter today.
I'm not very good at not doing things.

(Also, side note, I actually did like Leah. I think she got a bad rap because she wasn't developed properly when they were given the opportunity and just used as a prop. So, she'll be around for a bit in this story.)

Cameron carries his nephew down to AAU after quite a while, the Darwin staff had been taking turns watching over Cole for something like two hours while waiting for the return of the boy’s mother. He had been told that Bernie was assisting the unit for the day since Keller was slow and AAU could always use the help.

Donna picks her head up when she sees the familiar young man walking closer, she stands, lifting her hands to her mouth in excitement, “Is that little Cole?”

Cam nods, offering her a smile, “Is my sister down here?” When the nurse shakes her head negatively, he sighs, “Okay, well...Mum or Serena?” He hands the boy over when the nurse holds her hands out. Then sets his sister’s knapsack full of baby supplies onto the desktop.

She beams as the baby leans his head tiredly against her, whimpering. “Awww. What’s wrong, little one?” Donna gently rubs his back.

“He’s getting hungry and his Mum is nowhere in sight. I’ve tried calling, but she isn’t picking up. I’ve looked everywhere on Darwin.” Cam explains, “It’s been too long and I’m starting to worry.”

“Well, she can’t just vanish.” Donna returns to her seat behind the desk, “I can score him some
formula at least, to tie him over, but...maybe just put out a warning. Like when we have a patient that goes missing.” She offers, standing when the babe whimpers more, she lifts the telephone receiver, calling up to Otter for them to bring her formula for the boy’s age as well as a bottle or two in order to feed it to him. “I can watch him if you need to go back up to Darwin.” Donna returns the receiver back to the telephone base, as she gently sways to keep the baby calm.

“I just need to find my sister at this point.” Cameron mumbles, sighing. “I have my mobile on me, if she turns up, call me.” He knows the woman would have his number from their days of working together, when he sees her nod, he makes his way back toward the door.

Leah picks her head up after seeing the young man step away, “Was that Cameron Dunn?” She motions, smiling a bit toward the baby in the nurse’s arms.

“It was. Seems he’s having issue finding his sister.” When the young doctor seems confused, Donna continues, “Cam is Ms. Wolfe’s son.” She thought Leah would have noticed from Charlotte having spent a bunch of time on AAU while she was pregnant. “And this little one...is Cole. Charlotte’s son.”

“He has her eyes.” Leah nods, smiling a little, “She’s missing, though? Has anyone put out an alert?”

“Not yet, no.”

“I’ll do it.” The doctor wheels over to be in front of a computer, clicking the screen a few times to get to where she can do so. “Hopefully she’s okay.”

“I hope so as well.” Donna nods, seeing the assistant staffer she had called from Otter with the bottles filled with the needed formula in each. “I’ll be back. I need to prepare this baby milk.” Donna carries one of the bottles away from the desk with the baby still resting and whimpering against her shoulder.

Leah sighs a little, feeling as if she isn’t doing enough. It isn’t that she’s particularly close to Ms. Wolfe’s daughter, she seemed nice enough while in the ward, but after her actions while the woman was a patient here all those months ago, she feels as if she needs to make it up to her. Leah stands, moving to the knapsack to rummage through it. Maybe something within its depths will give her some sort of clue.

Serena returns through the door leading to the theaters, cheetah print head covering in hand. She
notices the print of the bag, “Is Charlotte here?”

Lifting her head quickly, Leah glances over to her, “No...no, Ms. Campbell. I’m just trying to find identification.” Not completely a lie. She doesn’t know why she says it. Knee jerk reaction, possibly. Maybe some sort of desire to find the young woman first, to be the hero this time around. Make up for all her previous cock ups. “Excuse me.” She walks away from the woman, disappearing through the double doors.

Furrowing her brow, Serena folds her arms. She glances down at herself for a moment, whispering, “I hate my bloody scrubs.” She walks toward the staff locker room, making quick work of changing. She understood how Superman was able to change so quickly in a phone booth, having mastered it herself over the years. Making her way to the staff break room, she notices Donna standing with her grandson, “Cole?”

Donna turns, the baby happily smiling when it finally catches sight of the other woman, “Sorry, you were in theater and Cameron seemed a bit...overwhelmed.” She hands the baby over, screwing the top onto the bottle and testing it’s contents on her wrist before offering it to her.

Serena furrows her brow, “Where’s Charlotte?” She offers the boy the bottle, holding it for him as he hungrily chugs it. Seeing the nurse shaking her head negatively, “You don’t know?”

“Cam is searching for her, but is having a bit of difficulty.” Donna feels the need to tone down just how serious things seem to be, “I’m sure he’ll find her in due time. We put out a patient search warning for her. Dr. Faulkner is looking for her as well.” She sees Serena’s frustrated sigh at the mention of the doctor, “She really is just trying to help this time. Promise.”

Nodding a little, Serena glances down at the boy who is gently kneading the back of her hand as she holds the glass bottle. “They’ll locate, Mummy...let’s just hope they do before your Gran finds out.”

“Before his Gran finds out what?” Bernie stands not far behind, lowering her eyes when her fiance turns to face her.

Serena licks her lips, moving closer to the woman, “Nothing. Everything is fine.” She hates lying, but knows she doesn’t want to rile the woman up too much. “Do you want to take him?” She sighs, seeing the look she’s receiving from the woman.

Donna makes quick work of explaining what little information she has, “We can keep Cole on the
ward in the meantime and Cameron is aware of the situation since she left Cole with him.” She
shrugs, “It isn’t ideal, but I think we’ll be okay. He’s beginning to get tired anyway.” The younger
woman offers a soft smile, “I believe I saw a papoose in his bag—”

“No, it’s okay. I can go on home with him.” Serena glances between the women, “I’m, technically,
out in an hour’s time anyhow. I was only going to stay longer if you were here.” She makes eye
contact with Bernie, “Charlotte drove herself here. You can go on home with her.” She pauses,
“when she’s finished sorting herself out.”

“And if she doesn’t?” Bernie asks quietly, reaching a hand out to stroke the baby’s soft short hair.

Serena nods slowly, “I know you’ll get to her.” She glances down to the babe quickly, then back to
her partner, “Between you, Cam, and Leah...she would need to be invisible for you not to seek her
out.” She sighs softly, “I’ll give Ric a ring, see if he would be able to come in a bit earlier...free
things up for you.”

Bernie quickly smirks, kissing her partner tenderly. “Thank you.” She leans down, pressing a kiss to
their grandson’s head before turning on her heels to return to the unit.

“Well...that went better than I thought it would.” Donna offers a weak smile, following behind the
blonde.

Serena stands alone with the baby, glancing down to him again, “Don’t you worry, Cole. Everything
will be fine.”
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Upon finding her in an unexpected source, Leah helps Charlotte talk through some things.

Leah opens the door to the roof. The only place she hasn’t looked. Sure, she shouldn’t have left her place on AAU, but this was important. She saw the look on Dr. Dunn’s face. The smell of cigarette smoke hits her hose, causing her to furrow her brow a bit. She walks out a bit more, near to one of the larger duct structures. Coming face to face with the familiar young woman, “Charlotte.” She starts to smile.

Exhaling slowly, Charlotte glances over toward her, “Dr. Faulkner...you’re out of breath.” She wears sunglasses, having just been letting the sun capture and warm her face over the past couple hours even thought it was beginning to go dark out.

“You’re a hard woman to find.” Leah nods a little, “Mind if I join you?”

“It’s a free rooftop.” Char looks away, toward nothing in particular. Just the sky really. She brings her cigarette back to her lips, the brown paper wrapped tobacco wedged between her index and middle fingers. “It’s been over two years since I’ve had a fag...I figure it’s time.”

“Two years?”

“Well, I was pregnant...and before that, my partner didn’t like it. So, I stopped.” The younger woman explains, “I know I shouldn’t since I’m breastfeeding but...Cole will just need to get over it today.” Char finishes the cigarette, as it had been down to the filter. She tosses it to the ground, stubbing the embers with the toe of her shoe. She folds her arms after, inhaling deeply, “Yeah, that was worth it.”

Leah nods slowly, lowering herself next to the other woman as the space around them grows silent. She speaks up after a moment, “Are you okay?”

Char shrugs, “I mean, I’m not dying, I’m not bleeding, I’m not sick. So...yeah.”
“Do you want to talk about it?” Leah leans forward a little, just finding a comfortable position, “I mean...I’m not going to force you to do anything, but I’m not your Mum or Ms. Campbell...I’m just an impartial person. Just an ear for a chin wag. I’ve a few years on you, so I might have life experience-”

Humming a soft, almost bitter chuckle, “Are you in love with a man that would beat you within an inch of your life?”

“Okay, you’ve got me.”

“He’s on Darwin right now,” Charlotte nods, lifting a hand up to push a stray lock of hair behind her ear, “and my brother has been tending to him...without telling me. Though, I suppose, by law, he can’t. So...I don’t really fault him or anything.”

“I’m guessing you’ve spoken to him.” Leah glances over to her, “This man on Darwin.”

“Yeah.” The younger woman swallows, “My son’s father didn’t even want to see our son. Cole is...absolutely perfect. Born from the pyre like the Phoenix and...I’m free. For the first time in years, I’m free.” Relieved tears begin to flood Charlotte’s eyes, “I used to think Anders would sneak in while we were all asleep and take him. It was a constant nightmare...I’ve had it ever since I moved in with Serena.” She pauses, “I’d wake up in a panic...I’d...try to wake him up in my belly or, I’d keep my hand on him in his travel cot next to my bed...my hand on his bum.”

“And now you’re free.” Leah reiterates, “I’d say that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“I’m sad for him...I’m sad for Anders. I’m sad to lose him.” Char lets a tear escape her eye, wiping her cheek once it moves past the protection of her sunglasses. “I feel so stupid.”

“You aren’t stupid.” Leah shakes her head, leaning back a bit, “Not by a long shot.”

“Stockholm syndrome, isn’t it?” Charlotte exhales a soft chortle to herself, “that’s what...what I think it’s called, at least. What other people say...”

“I’m not a psychologist, but...maybe in some way.” Leah gives her a reassuring, closed mouth smile,
“I understand why you feel the way you do though. He’s your son’s father. You, I’m assuming, expected to have a life with him...and you didn’t get that. So...you’re in mourning. Not just about him, but about what could have been.” She notices the other woman’s subtle nod, “and I reckon that’s a completely justifiable emotion to have.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.” Char replies softly.

“Well, maybe it’s just something you need to talk about with someone...someone who is a true professional in the field and not me.” Leah offers, “I can help you find someone. They even let you do these things over the phone now.” She, platonically, places her hand on the younger woman’s leg, “It works...and if it doesn’t, I’ll help you look for another doctor until you find one you mesh with.”

A silence falls between them again, until Charlotte breaks it a few moments later, “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Shrugging, Leah smirks again, “There doesn’t need to be a reason. At least, there isn’t with me. I mean...I’m a doctor. I help people. It’s what I do.” She notices the other woman glance over to her, “Promise.”

“And this has nothing to do with your desire to get back into my Stepmum’s good graces?”

“Not at all.” Leah shakes her head, “I really was worried about you. Donna was tending to your son, but I’m certain I heard that Serena has taken him home...your Mum is still on AAU. That had a four person RTC come in...and it required her attention, but she definitely didn’t want to be there. She wanted to keep looking for you, but couldn’t do so until Mr. Griffin came in.”

“And now?” Char yawns a little, “is Ric in now?”

Leah lifts her hand up, checking the timepiece on her wrist for the time, “If he isn’t yet, he should be at any moment.” She nods, “Do you want to head back down? We could stop at Pulse’s and grab a coffee before you head over to the consultant’s office. I’ll even spring for a piece of lemon cake for you.”

Charlotte smiles to herself, nodding, “Thanks, Dr. Faulkner.”
Standing, Leah helps another woman up, keeping an reassuring arm around her, “Please, it’s just Leah.”
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Leah and Charlotte share a coffee and talk about the laws of attraction.

Upon leaving the hospital with her daughter in tow, Bernie can no longer hide her relief.

Donna notices the consultant attempting to quickly gather her things to continue the search for her daughter, as she places the telephone back onto the receiver. “Ms. Wolfe.” She calls out, standing from the desk and jogging to the woman when she sees her sweep from the office.

Bernie turns quickly, “What is it?” Her tone quick, an air of worry still about her. Donna knew what she was going to do, why would she possibly stop her. “Has someone found Charlotte?”

Nodding, Donna continues, “Dr. Faulkner is bringing her back down. She was on the roof.” Seeing the widening of the consultant’s eyes, she shakes her head a little, “Nothing drastic. She’s fine. Just...wait here for her. They’ve stopped to grab a coffee.”

“Coffee?” Bernie shakes her head a little, exhaling slowly, “I’ll meet them down there...thanks, Donna.” When the nurse nods, she makes her way toward the elevators, touching the down arrow button. So many things had wafted through her brain as to her daughter’s whereabouts. Her son never admitting to her that his sister was truly lost in the first place to her. She had to hear it from nurses’ murmurs. The doors open to the lift and she slides inside, touching the button to the ground floor.

“I did get to see your lovely son today. He’s very handsome.” Leah grins to the younger woman, glad she’s seemed to relax quite a bit. “Has your eyes.”

Charlotte nods, her sunglasses pushed up to hold her hair back from her eyes, “He does. The one thing I was hoping he’d get from his father. Anders always had these beautiful hazel eyes and Cole’s stuck with my muddy brown ones.”

“Well, I think they’re lovely.”

“Yours are like...the color of glass. That’s not fair. You look like an ethereal being.” Char makes a
face, amused by the woman, “Have a thing for brown eyes, do you?”

“Guilty.” Leah hums a soft chuckle, “Is your coffee okay?”

“Oh, you don’t get to change the subject that easily.” The younger woman has a soft chortle to herself, “You have a thing for brown eyed women and...what else...”

“My lips are sealed.” Leah blushes a bit. She picks her head up as she notices the younger woman’s mother approaching them from the elevator, “Saved by the boss.” Leah turns, “Ms. Wolfe, care for some coffee to go? There’s no queue. I wouldn’t mind.”

“No, you’ve done more than enough for the day, thank you, Leah.” Bernie grins to the woman before watching her walk away, “Where did you park earlier?”

“You have your own spot and it’s your car, so...there.” Charlotte offers her mother a soft smile, motioning with a tilt of her head toward the ambulance entrance. She starts to walk in the direction, knowing her mother would be immediately behind her.

“Charlotte.” Bernie attempts, having waited until they were next to the car when her daughter turns around to face her. The smell of cigarette smoke hits her nose. She didn’t know her daughter smoked in the first place, but then vices run in families sometimes. She holds her arms out, motioning her desire to embrace her, “Would you mind if I...” She trails off. Though she’s gotten better over the past few months, she knows there’s still a long way to go with the young woman.

Char wraps her arms around her mother quickly. She closes her eyes in their embrace, a tear threatening to escape the confines of her lids, when her mother holds her closely in return. “I’m so sorry for worrying you today.” She turns her head sideways on Bernie’s shoulder, resting her cheek, “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know you didn’t.” Bernie just holds her daughter, running her fingers through the young woman’s hair, “That’s all I do though...between you and Cameron, I’m surprised I have any hair left that isn’t gray.”

“Dye probably helps.” Charlotte grins, hearing a soft chortle from her mother. “I just...I felt like I was choking. Felt like I needed to-”
“Get away.” Bernie whispers, knowing the feeling all too well. “I know I’m not...” She tilts her head from side to side, “I’m not the ideal sounding board when it comes to motherhood, but I understand. I’ve been there...of course, our situations are completely different and I was a less than ideal mother, but-”

“No, there are no ideal mothers. You’re my mother. I think I can speak for Cam when I say, that’s all we ever expected you to be.” Char lifts her head, making eye contact with the woman, “And now I expect you to be a fantastic grandmother, which you’ve been thus far.” She clears her throat, “I appreciate it, Mum, thank you.”

“Serena is home with Cole. What say you to grabbing take-away and watching telly in bed...while having a cocktail or two?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, “Well, I’ll be having a cocktail...if you’d rather something else-”

“I think you’re speaking my language, Mum.” Char winks toward her, opening the passenger side door as her mother retreats to the driver side. She sinks into her own seat, leaning her head back. Charlotte has always promised herself that she wouldn’t be a parent like her mother, but maybe she is more like the woman than she gives herself credit for. She isn’t sure how she feels about it. “Did you want to phone Serena to see if there’s anything she would like?”

Bernie shakes her head, “I know what she likes.” A sheepish smile grows across her face, “I’m learning what you like again...I’ll get there soon, I’m sure.” She gives a quick glance to her as a traffic light, “We have plenty of time to learn those things about one another now.”

“You enjoy spicy food, but not terribly spicy that you aren’t able to taste your food. You enjoy mystery films and television series, with a secret affinity for quiz shows. For as ridiculously intelligent you are, quiz shows don’t always display that for you. I think it’s because of how oblivious you can be at times.” Charlotte smirks, hearing her mother’s honking laugh again. “You love your sweets...you and Serena both. That’s why I make them when we run out. You just don’t usually notice. Cakes, tarts...puddings, whatever. I learned...or I reference instructions if there’s something new I want to try.”

“Cooking absolutely baffles me.” Bernie snarls her lip playfully, “I’d love to learn though. Nothing tremendously complicated, maybe you can teach me sometime?”

“Maybe, and hear me out, something romantic for Serena while Cole and I have a night in a hotel...or with Cam?” Char shrugs, smirking, “Or I’ll even con Dad into putting us up for the night.” She hums a shortle to herself, “Imagine that...Dad in the same house as a baby again.”
“I’m sure it would be an experience for you.” Bernie nods slowly, “I’m surprised he hasn’t visited more often...he loved when you and Cam were infants.”

A silence falls over the car again, Charlotte slowly moving her eyes to glance through her passenger side window, “Things change...People change.” Her tone quiet and she knows her mother won’t respond because a part of Charlotte’s statement means Bernie too. Her mother for the better, her father for the worse. Though the distance between she and her father has pained her a bit, she’ll take the trade off.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Upon swapping stories and a bottle of scotch, Charlotte finally tells her mother some news.

When Serena decides to join the party, Char asks her a question she instantly regrets.

Chapter Notes

It's redic cold out here in the states. So, here's an extra chapter.

Not that it being cold out has anything to do with anything, but...It's cold.

Stay in, stay warm. Read more.

Bernie offers a smile to her daughter, motioning that she would be right back, “I’m just going to slip on my pajamas, if you want to do the same.” She lets herself out of the room, closing the door behind herself. She walks just across the hall, opening the door to her bedroom when she heard the soft hum of the television through the door. The sight of her fiance asleep with their grandson sleeping on her chest warming her heart. She doesn’t necessarily want to disturb her, but moves around to the other side of the bed, leaning down to place a soft kiss on the baby’s fuzzy head, then a soft one on Serena’s lips.

Serena feels the kiss, bringing a free hand up to place on her partner’s cheek. She’d know that kiss anywhere. “You’re home.” Her voice thick, heavy with sleep. “Did you find Charlotte?”

Nodding, Bernie kisses her lips again, quicker this time before standing up, beginning to unbutton her shirt. “We’re having curry in her room. I bought you some.” She watches her partner, “Or I can bring it in here for you.”

Tilting her head to the side, she looks to her alarm clock, seeing that it’s still relatively early in the night. “Blimey...I must have just nodded off with Cole...and he’s probably not going to sleep through the night either.”

“Don’t know about that. He’s had quite an adventurous day as well.” Bernie raises an eyebrow, removing her blouse, tossing it into the hamper in their closet.
“That’s why all of your shirts become wrinkled.” Serena scowls toward her.

“Nope, that’s a wrinkle-free one.” The blonde gives her a mischievous smirk, quite proud of herself. “I’ll do the pressing this week—”

“You will not. You forget to move the clothes to the dryer when I ask you to after I’ve thrown them into the washer. I went to work twice this week without pants.” Serena isn’t angry or even frustrated, she was at the time, but she finds it amusing now. “So, until you start doing that—”

“Okay, okay.” Bernie hums a chortle to herself, “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“You could be more like me and not always wear pants anyway.” Bernie hears her partner start to chuckle as she removes her own skinny-jeans, tossing them into the same hamper. She was wearing her pants today though, black cotton ones, matching her cotton brasserie. She opens the drawer of the chest, removing a pair of pajama bottoms and a cotton t-shirt to sleep in.

“Are you putting on a show for me?” Serena raises an eyebrow, “I mean, our grandson is here. I’m not sure it would be very—”

“Oh, you know I’ll put on a show for you anytime you want me to, but I’m actually just rather hungry at the moment.” Bernie hears the disappointed groan from her partner, removing her undergarments to finally pull on her night clothes. “Why not put him down and join us?”

Glancing down to the babe on her chest, Serena pouts playfully, “But he looks so comfortable...and he has that baby smell.”

“Well, don’t then. Sit here and starve and cuddle the boy.” Bernie pulls her t-shirt over her naked chest, giving a sly smirk to her partner as she makes her way to the door, quietly pulling it open.

“Tease.” Serena mumbles, watching as the woman leaves.
Bernie returns to her daughter’s room, taking note of the young woman dressed similarly to herself. “Did you get forks?” Upon Charlotte holding them up from her folded-leg position on the bed, she smiles a bit, “Quite a speedy one, aren’t you?”

“Well, you were speaking with Serena for a bit.” Charlotte inhales deeply, “and I’ve noticed Cole isn’t in his room. Is she holding him again?”

“Of course. Pretty certain if she could just strap him to her chest all the time, she’d be absolutely content.” Bernie carefully climbs onto the bed, food dishes spread across the comforter. “Green curry with this one. Where is the naan?”

“Here.” Char pushes the circular dish toward her, “Don’t know why you told me to obtain said cutlery, we both know you’re going to use the bread and your hands instead.” She makes a face, “I dated a Thai man once, before I was with Anders...he was so handsome. His Mum was a bit pushy. Probably one of the only reasons we separated. He always sided with her.”

Bernie gives a knowing hum, “Sounds familiar.”

“She made amazing food though. Probably the only thing I miss about that relationship.” Charlotte relaxes a bit more, “I’ve decided, though, that I’m just...giving up men for a while. Giving up anyone. Any romance.” Charlotte nods, obviously being honest. She reaches to her bedside table, “Shall we swig this like a couple of teenagers?” Holding a bottle of scotch out to the woman, she shakes it a little.

“Is there any other way?”

“I mean, I brought glasses up, but why should we dirty glasses when we don’t need to?” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, “Is Serena coming to eat?

“Depends on if she manages to rip herself from Cole.” Bernie smirks, seeing her daughter’s amused eyeroll.

“Couldn’t get her to hold him for the first couple weeks and now we can’t separate her from him.” Charlotte nods, smiling warmly, “I’m really happy she was able to turn it around. Both of you, so enamored with him. It’s rather funny to me. The surgeon and the Major, head over heels in love with an infant, whose main trick is flapping his arms like a bird when he’s excited.” She takes a bite of her food, “Little Bird Wolfe.”
“That’s exactly how it is. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Bernie nods, using the naan to scoop up some food, shoving it into her mouth.

Charlotte takes a sip of the scotch bottle, then focuses on her mother, “You know, I was going to save this for your Christmas or something, but...I wanted to tell you that you and Cole aren’t the only ones with the last name Wolfe anymore. I changed mine when I went to register Cole...and you’ll never guess who my two witnesses were.” When she gets a look from her mother, she continues, “Ric and Fleur. Imagine how incredibly amusing that day was.”

“You’re joking...” Bernie trails off, her eyes dampening, “Why did you change your name?”

“I didn’t feel...as if that was my name anymore.” Char shakes her head, “So, all of my official things needed changing. Driver’s License, Passport...nightmare really. I don’t envy Serena for needing to go through it all when you lot make it official.”

“Ric Griffin has known all this time and never said a word to me?” Bernie starts to grin, “I’m absolutely honored, Char, thank you.”

“Char Wolfe sounds a bit better anyway, doesn’t it?”

“I’d say.” Bernie hums a short, turning her head when there’s a knock at the door, “Finally coming to eat?” She calls, taking a sip from the bottle of scotch as her partner opens the door, “Come on. Old fashioned sleepover.”

“Cole is in our bed, surrounded by pillows.” Serena pouts pitifully, “Snoring away...have you spoken to the pediatrician about that?” She steps in more, clad in a pair of burgundy silk pajamas as she climbs onto the bed, seeing a amused look on the mother and daughter’s face, she raises an eyebrow, “What?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to steal my son away from me.” Char takes the bottle of scotch, taking another sip.

“I am.” Serena replies playfully, taking the handful of food from her partner’s fingertips, “Guinevere had quite a bit of colic when she was small, so it’s nice to be with a baby that isn’t screaming bloody murder constantly...or that actually wants me to hold them.”
“Guinevere wanted you to hold her.” Bernie furrows her brow.

“Now, but...not at first. She’s gotten better.” Serena nods, picking up a fork to bring some food to her mouth, “Significantly better.”

“Were you like this with Elinor?” Charlotte asks suddenly, innocently. She pauses when the room goes very quiet, “Sorry...um...if it’s too difficult to talk about for you-”

“No, no. I’m her mother. I’ll always be her mother, whether she’s here or not.” Serena offers a reassuring half smile, “but no...not really. I mean, I’d hold her while I was studying or...writing one of my many papers of scientific merit. She was very small then...and she’d rest on my chest as I’d type on a very old typewriter, it was what I could afford at the time.” She huffs a soft chuckle, “I’ll never forget those moments...not in a million years.”

“And you’ve told me that Elinor was studying to be a journalist...maybe she picked up on all of your writing when she was just a babe. Maybe, just maybe, you’re the reason she started studying it in the first place.” Char offers, “I’m sure case studies and multiple thesis are interesting, but it’s finding out the facts that matter most...they’re what make you write the paper to begin with, right?” The young woman raises an eyebrow, “Much like a journalist.”

“Never thought of it that way.” Serena begins to smile a bit more, “Suppose I may have had more to do with her path of study than I gave myself credit for.”

“You had more to do with a lot of things. She was an incredibly interesting young woman.” Bernie nods, taking another sip from the bottle of scotch, “I would have loved to get to know her even more. She was just starting to warm up to me.”

Serena leans over to casually kiss her partner’s lips, “With that irresistibility? She would have absolutely come around, darling.” A smile continues to cover her face. It’s nice to be able to think and speak of her daughter in a positive light, and not just the tragedy that befell her. Especially since she promised herself that her grandchildren, and pseudo grandchildren as in the case of Guinevere, would know of their Auntie Elinor very well. It was just a matter of implementation.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Cole spends the day with his grandmothers.
Charlotte travels down a dangerous path.

Chapter Notes

Bernie sits on the blanket laid out in the backyard garden of the house, her grandson sitting within the confines of her lap, chewing on one of his cold teething rings. “Does that feel better?” She runs her fingers through his growing light-brunette hair. “Giving yourself a mohawk, aren’t you?”

“He’s quite a good listener.” Serena grins, having been watching them for a bit. She slowly moves over to the blanket, lowering herself to sit across from them, “Didn’t know where you popped off to. We aren’t usually home together at the same time...during daylight.”

“Very true.” The blonde lifts her head, meeting her girlfriend’s eyes, “Quite the lucky little bloke...having his grandmothers to himself.” Bernie glances down to her grandson again, smiling to herself a little as he looks incredibly comfortable leaning against her, happily chewing a frozen water
filled teething ring and babbling occasionally. “He’s going to get his first tooth soon.” When the infant babbles again, as if he’s replying to her statement, she continues, “It’s the truth. I just want your Mum to be prepared when she attempts to feed you and comes away bloody from the ordeal.”

“You speak from experience.”

Humming with approval, Bernie nods, “With Cameron. Made me hesitant to feed Charlotte for as long as I did. When she reached a certain age...about the same age Cole is now, I’d run my finger along her gums each and every time before feeding.”

Serena reaches a hand out to stroke the babe’s chubby belly, earning a babble from him, “I always pumped with Elinor until I couldn’t. She had some stomach issues...and I didn’t really have the time anymore.” She gives a sad smile, “but she was otherwise perfect when she was small.”

Bernie takes hold of the woman’s free hand. “A fed baby is a happy baby.” She shrugs, “Doesn’t matter how it happens as long as it happens.” She glances down toward her grandson, “And Cole eats enough for everyone in the house. Big boy, he is.”

“That he is.” Serena nods, “Do we have his seat for the car? We should go out for lunch.” Shrugging a little, she smiles a bit as the baby begins to babble, “That’s right. I’d like to give you a proper showing off, handsome.” Lifting her head to meet her partner’s eyes, “Entirely up to you. We could do a bit of shopping...he’s going to need new clothing soon. He’s growing rather quickly.”

“I think that sounds like a great idea.” Bernie grins a bit, “And it’s a rather good day for it. Not that cold.” She places a hand to the baby’s hair, running her short nails through it again. The babe wearing a thick puffer snowsuit, “It’s about fourteen out. Balmy for February.”

Serena rolls her eyes as she stands. Bernie always does this, acting as if it’s warmer than it feels. “Yeah, alright.” She smirks a little, offering her hand to help the other woman stand with the babe in her arm.

“Food first.” Bernie pulls herself up via her girlfriend’s offered hand, the babe still babbling from his comfortable place against her side, “Char left a few prepared bottles in the chiller. If you get those, I can fetch a few nappies for his bag...along with some clothing.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Serena leads them toward the back door, opening it for her. “I’ll message Charlotte, just to let her know. She’s signing up for classes, correct?” Hearing the positive hum of
her partner, she removes the mobile from her pocket. *Grabbing lunch and taking Cole shopping. Be home later. Enjoy your day of freedom.*

Charlotte holds her mobile phone in her lap, having been playing digital solitaire. She huffs a soft laugh to herself, picking her head up from her place next to the hospital bed. She’s been coming here whenever her mother or Serena could watch Cole.

Anders slowly turns his head to the side, having heard her soft noise, “You lost?”

Giving an interested hum, Charlotte shakes her head a little, “No...you should know that by now.” She sets her mobile on the table next to her before folding her arms, “Fletch said you’ve declined any treatment for the cancer.” She clears her throat, shrugging a little, “Why?”

“On a first name basis with staff now...or are you with him?” Anders raises an eyebrow, a sly smirk starting to grow across his face. “Couldn’t wait to get away...so you can be a whore everywhere else.”

“You don’t intimidate me.” Of course he did, but Charlotte has gotten really good at not letting it show. “Even if I were sleeping with him, it wouldn’t be your business. We aren’t together anymore, Anders.”

“Right, so why are you here?”

“Answer the question.” She says again, her unamused expression like laser beams through him, “Or do you fear your own answer? Are you too chicken to pay for your own bullshit? Too scared to face the music from putting your own son at risk?” Char begins to smirk, “You’re a coward.”

“I’m not a coward.” Anders mumbles, looking away from her, toward the ceiling. Literally, anything except her.

“Really? You’re acting otherwise.” Charlotte shakes her head slowly, keeping her facial expression, “It’s why you didn’t want to see Cole. It’s why you keep telling them to treat you last. It’s why you’re just laying here...waiting to die. You’re a fucking coward.”

“It would be pointless, Charlotte.” Anders answers quietly, not raising his voice, not lashing out. “You can be as angry as you wish with me, gods know you deserve to be, but...it’s already spread to
my spine. I’m forgetting things...I slop out sometimes...” He clears his throat, “And I’ve signed a
uh...the paper for them not to attempt resuscitation.”

“Because you’re a coward.”

“Because I’m a realist.” He lifts his arms, folding them to place behind his head, “And it would mean
I’m able to care for you and Cole quicker than I am now.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t act like the only reason you signed a DNAR is because of some...sudden
desire to take care of us. I’m tending to him just fine enough on my own.” Charlotte shakes her head
a little. “He’s perfect in every single way...and I never thought I could love someone so fully as I
love him. I’d die for him...no questions asked, but I’d much rather live for him...and continue being
his mother until I can’t.”

“Good. I’m happy for you.” Anders tone ever so slightly sarcastic.

“And what would you have done if you weren’t in this predicament? Would you have stayed?
Would you have been there for us?” Charlotte doesn’t scowl, just shrugging a little, “You have your
son. The son that you wanted and you’re just whatever, sod all now?”

“Yep.” He adjusts his position, moaning a little.

Charlotte can feel the tears forming in her eyes, shaking her head a little, “I’m not leaving, Andy. I’m
not leaving until you take your last breath. I want you to remember every single thing you did.” Her
chin trembles ever so slightly, “Not all of it can be blamed on a brain tumor. The man that wrote that
title that Cam gave me...I don’t know if he ever really existed.”

Anders falls silent a moment before continuing, “I can have you removed.”

“You can, but you won’t.” Char folds her arms over her chest, “Everyone on this floor knows who
you are to me. They remember when I was pregnant, they remember when...other things happened.
They know how involved my brother is with my son...and in your care. You can complain until
you’re blue in the face, but...I won’t be removed.” There’s a twinkle in her eye. She knows she has
the upper hand here and she isn’t about to waste it.

“So...what do you feel you’ll accomplish?”
She shakes her head a little, “I’m not here to accomplish anything. I don’t need to be.” Charlotte sighs, “I’m just here...with you.”

Anders nods slowly, feeling himself growing emotional, “Thank you.” He whispers, not able to bring himself to look toward her again, “I don’t deserve it and...I don’t understand why you’re...making a point to do so, but...thank you, Lottie.”

“Don’t call me Lottie .” Charlotte says softly. She looks him in the eye, seeing his far away glance toward her, realizing that he honestly forgot at that very moment. This was going to get much worse and there wasn’t going to be a point where things are set to get better. Everything will be downhill from here.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Serena talks of her wedding reservations over lunch with Bernie and Cole.

Chapter Notes

16 weeks.

Serena takes a bite of the herb crusted snapper from the porcelain dish, glancing over to their grandson, sitting comfortably in his pushchair. She lifts her eyes, meeting that of her partner, seated across from her. “I told you that this would be a good idea. We haven’t eaten lunch out in...it seems so long.”

“It does.” Bernie smirks a little, “Honestly, I didn’t think he’d be as easy as he has for this outing.” She takes a bite of her chicken breast over top of her salad, “Even now...” She motions to the infant as he pleasantly chew on his silicone teething ring, babbling to himself and anyone that will listen. Bernie hums a soft chuckle to herself, “I’ve been thinking that maybe...we could start thinking of getting away for a night or two every now and then.”

“Already?” Serena raises an eyebrow.

“All I said was for us to begin thinking about it.” Bernie offers, “Charlotte seems to have things under control and if she needs assistance, she can contact Jason or Cameron.” She shrugs, “I don’t believe she’ll need to, but she can.”

“Even though she’s just starting to go to school again?” She scoops a bit of polenta onto her fork, a nervousness washing over her, “and you know how she can get if she’s alone-” Serena bites the corner of her lip, realizing how ridiculous she is sounding, “I apologize.”

“It’s okay.” Bernie shakes her head a little, “I think part of your anxiety with her being alone is also your anxiety of leaving her alone...going back to Boxing Day.” She hears the babe begin to whimper for her attention. Setting her fork onto her plate, she leans down, releasing him from the safety buckle of his seat, and lifting him to her lap. “Anders is in police custody and on his deathbed anyway. He has no contact with Charlotte...or Cole. There’s nothing to worry about for either of you.”
Serena glances to the babe, who is just staring up at Bernie with complete adoration, “You think I’m being ridiculous.”

“I think it was an incredibly traumatic situation you went through. A man pushed his way into our home and held you captive. That would be stressful for anyone, Serena.” Bernie’s voice is soft, caring, “I reckon your fears are absolutely founded...which is why I think you should speak with a professional about how best to handle those fears.”

Nodding absently, Serena turns her attention toward her plate, “It was months ago, but...it feels like it was just yesterday. My nightmares take their turns between that and when Elinor finally died...except they both actually happened, so I suppose they aren’t actually nightmares.” She’s trying very hard to keep her emotions in check.

“Which is why you should speak with someone on the regular. Even if it’s over the phone sometimes. It would be easier to fit into your schedule.” Bernie offers, lifting up her fork again and noticing her grandson pick up the unused spoon that was next to her plate, bringing it to his mouth to gum. “I have a better idea.” She mumbles to her grandson, taking his spoon and stirring it in her fizzy drink before giving it back to him.

“Bernie.” Serena scowls toward her, amused at the same time.

She grins broadly as the baby gladly gums the spoon again, excited by the new taste. “Is that so delicious, Cole?”

“Baby’s first sugar rush.” Serena shakes her head a little.

“I’m his Gran, I’m supposed to spoil him...and I plan to.” Bernie chuckles a little as she baby babbles to her, “I know, you should tell Nan that it’s okay once in a while and I’m not putting it in your bottles anytime soon.” She looks back up to her partner, “Everything will get better, Serena. I promise it will.”

Clearing her throat a little, Serena sits back in her seat, “You know, Jason was asking me the other day what we were planning in regards to our wedding.” She raises an eyebrow, “I told him we hadn’t started planning anything yet and were rather comfortable, but...do you think we should start planning?”
“Whatever you want. You know that.” Bernie nods, reaching out to take a sip from her glass, “If you want something big, we’ll do big. If you want something small, we’ll do that. If you want to elope, we’ll run away tonight.” She meets the woman’s eyes, “I mean it.”

“I want you to be happy.” Serena tilts her head to the side.

“I’m happy when you’re happy…and I do mean that.” Bernie sets her glass back down, placing her hand over her girlfriend’s as they continue to sit there, “You’ll be my wife…my partner for the rest of our lives. That’s all I care about, Campbell.”

Serena’s eyes moisten and she just begins to focus on Cole, who is now just happily staring at her and gumming the spoon held in his chubby little fingers. It causes a soft smile to grow across her face, “I agree, Berenice.” She nods slowly, “I just don’t know what I want.” She pauses, thinking a moment, “I know if we elope, we’ll have some very…disappointed family members at home.”

“They’ll get over it.” Bernie shakes her head, “Or we can have-”

“Elinor won’t be there…and,” Serena glances away, “I um…”

“How about this, how about we just have dinner once we come home? After the fact, we can come together. Whether it is at a restaurant or at home, something where we can be together…and celebrate a bit.” Bernie offers, holding the baby out for her girlfriend to take hold of, knowing she needs the comfort at the moment.

Serena gathers the boy into her arms, holding him closely, “Can’t we just take Cole with us and run away?” She amuses, “Never come back. We’ll...move to an island.” The babe just stares up toward her, offering a smile, “See? You like that idea too.”

“Great idea.” Bernie nods slowly, “I’m sure his mother will love it.” She replies sarcastically, “though I’d imagine that Guinevere would feel a bit left out. We’d better nab her as well. We’ll move to this non-existent island and what...live off the land? Grow our own fruits and vegetables? Become vegetarians?”

“Pescatarians. I’m certain there will be fish around our imaginary island.” Serena sighs a little, lifting Cole to her shoulder and removing the spoon from his hands, “I’m sorry...I’ve just really been thinking about Ellie as of late. I don’t mean to bring-”
“Well, if we did have something with our families, I’d want her represented. All of our children present there one way or another.” Bernie meets her eye, “Same with these little ones. If we’re doing a family thing, they’re all going to be there...whether they like it or not.” She offers a reassuring smile, “Not that we need to worry about it. I don’t think you’d be able to keep the kids from our festivities.”

“Highly doubtful indeed.” Serena absently strokes the babe’s back as she listens to him chew on his own fist. “I think someone is getting hungry and we have a bit of shopping to do for our sweet boy.”

“I’ll get the bill and you can feed him?” Bernie offers, “Have a calming sit down and relax before spending far too much money on a child that is no more than four months old.” She receives a playful scowl from her partner, “Which I’m sure he will absolutely appreciate.”

“Of course he’ll appreciate it.” She smirks a little, watching as her girlfriend stands and walks away to the cashier. Serena tilts her head to the babe on her shoulder, “Sweet boy.” Her voice quieter, glad she has someone else to focus on other than thoughts of her deceased daughter. That’s all she she can do at this point is put her mind elsewhere.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Cameron finds his sister in a compromising position.
Charlotte tries to keep her brother silent.

Chapter Notes

It was a nice day outside...so here's another chapter. Same day as the last couple.
Cole is 16 weeks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cameron folds his arms, standing just next to the door leading to his sister’s ex-boyfriend’s room, watching as his sister steps from the room. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hello, Cam.” Charlotte lifts her head to meet the gaze of her older brother. A look of defeat on her face that she was seen by the young man. “I’m happy to see you’re working...and haven’t cut out of this place to travel the world again. Congratulations.” She tries to walk past him, only to feel her brother gently take hold of her shoulder.

“No, no. This isn’t about me.” Cam lets her arm go when she gives him a look, putting his hands up in innocence. “I just...don’t understand why you’re here...visiting Anders Hero.” He shakes his head a little, “and I’m betting Mum or Serena are at home with Cole?”

“I’m allowed to leave once in a while, Cam. Cole is perfectly fine with his grandmothers.” Char folds her arms, not able to meet her brother’s gaze, “I was just...I just needed some...time.”

“So he’s with both of them.” Cameron nods slowly, “Where do they think you are exactly?”

“It really doesn’t matter-”

“Needs to be somewhere they wouldn’t ask many questions about if you were late coming home.”
Cam attempts to decipher what she could have possibly told their parents, “they’d have told me if you were getting a job...and you also don’t need one. Anders has spoken all about that.”

“Just because I don’t need one doesn’t mean I don’t want one.” Char shakes her head, “besides, I don’t need to defend or prove myself to you or anyone else.”

“Very true.” Cameron nods simply, placing his hands against his hips, “You’re totally right. Can’t wait to talk to Mum tonight...let her know I saw you-”

“Cameron.” Charlotte warns.

“Oh, is it a secret?”

“Why are you being such a shit right now?” Charlotte sighs, shaking her head, “You’re acting like a child not getting their way. You’re supposed to be the older brother and not-”

“The older brother who protects their younger sister.” Cameron answers, still standing in the hallway, “which is why I’m trying to figure out why you’ve been coming here to sit with your abusive ex.” He focuses on her, “especially since he’s been verbally abusive with various members of staff and only kept confined to the bed because of the shackles around his ankle and wrist. So, please help me understand, why would you be visiting him?”

She feels tears begin to flood her eyes and she continues keeping her eyes off her brother’s, knowing she wouldn’t be able to lie to him. Charlotte bites her lip a little, “You really wouldn’t understand, Cam.”

“Just try.” Cam shrugs, “I’m trying to understand so that when staff tells Mum that they saw you, I’m going to have an answer. Even if it isn’t the right one. I need to know what I could possibly get away with.” He continues to watch her, “I’m the one that lies to our parents, not you. That’s why you’re Darling Charlotte and I’m...ya know...just Cameron.”

It garners a soft huff of a chuckle from Char’s lips, “I love him, Cam.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that.”
“No one, even the worst of monsters, deserves to die alone.” Charlotte unfolds her arms, lifting her hand to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, “he doesn’t ever become abusive while I’m here. Not toward me or staff. I can’t explain what he does while I’m not here.” She tucks her arms back together, “I tell him about Cole and how happy we are without him...because he told me that he didn’t want to hear it.”

Cam raises an eyebrow, “I don’t understand why.”

“I need him to know how happy I am without him.” Char shrugs, “It’s stupid-”

“No, I don’t think it is.” Cameron shakes his head, “If something so simple is what helps you through things...I think you should do it. I just worry that...you might hurt yourself in the process though.” He raises his arms, motioning her in for a hug.

Charlotte rolls her eyes, hugging onto him begrudgingly. She doesn’t remember the last time she hugged her brother. Not when Cole was born. Not when she arrived on Darwin ward after her year away. Not like this. Not this tight embrace. She closes her eyes, feeling a tear escape from the enclosure and trickle down her cheek. He means his words and she knows that. “I love you, Cam, even if I don’t say it enough.”

Cameron nods a little, remembering his mother saying those exact same words what seems like forever ago. He shields his face away from hers and his emotions from his voice, “I love you too, Darling Charlotte.” He clears his throat a little, finally separating from her after a few moments as he holds her at arms length. “Please don’t let yourself get hurt. Promise me.”

“Yeah...and if I do, you’ll be my first call.” Char smirks ever so slightly, knowing her brother would always be there for her. Just like when they were kids. Though, maybe it was even more now. “Cole misses you.”

“I miss that little guy too. More than you even know. We’ll need to have some one-on-one time on my next day off.” Cameron lets her go, smiling toward her. He knows his role in the boy’s life was far more important than anything he’s ever done in the past. He is the only father figure to his nephew. Something he plans to fulfill to the fullest. “Hopefully Mum and Serena let me get a hold of him.”

“I can hardly feed him without them wanting to get their grubby hands all over him.” Charlotte replies sarcastically, “I’ll see to it that you and he have a day to yourselves. Teach him to be a true Wolfe boy.”
Cam begins to shake his head slowly, amused, “I still can’t believe you gave him the last name Wolfe.”

“Cole Berenike Wolfe sounds a lot better than Cole Berenike Dunn...also, I changed my name to match his as well.” Char shrugs, “So just you and Dad are Dunn now...all puns intended.” She brings her wrist up to peer toward her smartwatch, “I didn’t realize what time it was.” She runs a hand through her hair, “I need to get out of here. Talk to you later?”

“Of course.” Cameron watches as his sister walks briskly toward the elevator doors, knowing there wasn’t any part of this that was going to end well.

Chapter End Notes

_Berenike:_ Bearer of victory, Undefeated. Male form of Berenice.

AKA, Charlotte named Cole after her mother.
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Serena watches over Cole and Guinevere.

Charlotte comes clean about where she's been going during the day.

Chapter Notes

18 weeks.

Two weeks since the last chapter.

Guinevere sits next to Cole as the babe lounges in his bouncer. She reaches a hand out, gently stroking the boy's tummy. Leaning in, she smiles, “Hi baby.” She whispers a little, quite proud of herself for finally being able to sneak a pet to the infant. Previously, her Nan didn't really let her touch the baby and it made her quite cross with him. Now, though, as her Nan thought she was playing with her blocks while she made them lunch, she takes a moment with her pseudo-cousin. “Baby good.” When the boy begins to babble toward her excitedly, “Don know.” Guinevere shakes her head, not understanding him.

Serena is sure she heard the girl speaking and takes a moment to move from the kitchen to the doorway of the lounge. She listens to the girl for a few moments. Smiling a little, “Gwen, are you ready for lunch?” When the girl nods, toddling her way over toward the woman with a large smile on her face, shoving her hands up to be held, Serena obliges. “Were you having a chat with Cole?”

Gwen nods, “My am.” At just over a year old, the girl showed much advancement. All of which Serena attributed to her parents care of her, as well as her own care of the girl. “Good baby.”

“I know he is and you’re a very good big cousin.” Serena had purchased a high chair to keep exclusively for use at her own house, always going above and beyond for the girl. “My smart girl.” She kisses the top of the girl’s head as she sits her into the seat, strapping the belt around her waist before pushing the tray to lock-in on the top, hearing the girl proceed to bang her fists playfully on top.

Using her chubby fingers, Guinevere picks up the very soft pieces of carrots and peas, eagerly pushing them into her mouth. Moaning with excitement after each piece. She makes noises with her mouth, reaching for her cup when it’s placed onto her tray. “Ta Na.”
“You’re getting closer every single time, aren’t you?” Serena grins broadly, leaving her for a moment. She walks back to the lounge, retrieving her grandson from his position in the comfortable, vibrating lounger. “Your turn, handsome.” She lifts him to her hip, “Maybe your mother will start some food soon. I know you’d love it.”

Cole places his hand onto Serena’s cheek, squeezing it proudly with a grin covering his face as his grandmother carries him into the kitchen. He starts babbling very confidently before finally ending with, “Ma.” His lips smack and he does it again, “Ma.”

“Your...” Serena shakes her head a little, excitedly bouncing the boy, “Your first word.” She laughs a little at herself, “I should...” She pauses, realizing she couldn’t possibly tell his mother that she missed out on the milestone. Her name first and it wasn’t even toward her. Serena sighs, “Maybe...your Gran?” When the babe in her arms begins to pout, “Okay, I’m sorry. Your milk is all ready. Even has a bit of cereal in it. How does that sound?”

“Did he answer you?” Charlotte stands in the doorway, purse still across her body. She smiles a little as the woman pushes the teat of the milk bottle into the babe’s mouth. She begins by removing the bag, “Was he okay?”

“Of course.” Serena answers proudly, knowing the baby wouldn’t try to push the bottle away at any time. She holds the bottle for him, “Still too lazy to hold his bottle on his own.” When the boy smiles up toward her, she can’t help but let out a quick huff of a chortle.

“And Gwen? I didn’t know she was being dropped off.” Char moves over to the girl, “Carrots and peas? I bet they’re very tasty.” When the girl holds one up toward her, she shakes her head, “I couldn’t possibly, but thank you for offering.” She finally removes her jacket, taking it back to the foyer to hang it onto the hook, as well as her purse. Returning to the kitchen, she tugs open the refrigerator, “Shall we be naughty today and have a steak sandwich?”

“Um.” Serena realizes she’s asking her a question. She has a terrible poker face, “I’m sorry, what was that?”

Furrowing her brow a little, Charlotte closes the door of the appliance, “I was asking about steak sandwiches for lunch. Are you okay?”

“Yes, absolutely. I was just thinking of something sweet Gwen was doing not long ago.” Serena attempts to cover, “Steak sandwiches sound lovely.”
“Okay.” Sighing, she tugs the fridge door open again.

“How was class?”

Charlotte pauses, biting the corner of her mouth, glad her face was in the fridge, “Okay.” She licks her lips, “Fine, it was fine.”

That was an odd answer. Serena has come to learn the young woman’s habits through all the time they’ve spent together, “What did you learn about today?”

Trying to think of something quickly, Char blurts, “Um...well, it was more of a...review of things. Like...elderly care.” That was so lame. She winces a little, hoping she doesn’t hear any more questions, “I um...I may have fallen asleep in class for a bit, to be honest with you.”

“Sounds like it.” Serena glances over to Guinevere, smirking a little when the baby has food smeared all over her face. “Is that so scrumptious?” The girl offers her a messy hand, which she assumes has carrots within it, “They’re all for you, Gwennie. Thank you for sharing though.”

Charlotte hates lying. Especially to her family. “I um...” She clears her throat, removing the loin of relatively expensive steak from the fridge. “Can I talk to you without-”

“Telling your mother.” Serena finishes for her, “You know that’s always a yes, Charlotte.”

She focuses on the preparation of these sandwiches as she speaks, “I haven’t...I didn’t sign up for school yet.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, “I didn’t...plan to lie to you. I really didn’t. I just...I knew the two of you wouldn’t understand-”

“Try me.” Serena raises an eyebrow.

Char exhales softly, “I’ve been going to Holby and sitting with Anders.” She knows she just had to let it out. Put the words into the universe. She wasn’t even able to say them to her brother, he knew what she was doing without her even saying so. She falls silent as the pan heats over the stove, “Please, say something.” Her voice small, fearful.
“You’re right, I don’t understand.” The nightmares of Boxing Day run through Serena’s head.

“Yeah.” The young woman feels herself growing upset. Char knows she’s disappointed her stepmother, and she hates it. “I go and I tell him how happy I am without him...every day.” She pauses to inhale and exhale slowly, “and I just...I know of everything he put us through. You have a permanent scar from him...so do I...and I don’t want him to forget that he was the one to give them to us.”

Serena is glad she’s holding her grandson, the boy’s presence keeping her calmed. She gazes down to his eyes as he pauses his gulping to offer her a languid smile. “Okay...I wish you hadn’t lied to us though.”

“Well, to be technical, I never actually lied. You lot were the ones that assumed I went to sign up when I was only going for more information.” Charlotte shakes her head, “I’m appreciative that you’ve watched Cole each time I went, but...I can’t...I just can’t keep up the charade with you. I’m sorry I wasn’t up front about it.”

Nodding, she sets the baby bottle down, lifting the boy to her shoulder, gently rubbing his back in order to burp him. Serena finally meets the younger woman’s eyes, “I’ve um...I’ve started seeing a therapist again...to help me sort things.”

Char stands more upright, “Because of Boxing Day.” It wasn’t a question, it was something she just knew. “I never realized...I mean, I went through all of that on a daily basis, so I suppose I wasn’t as bothered by it-”

“It isn’t just that he was here...it was him knocking you out.” Serena manages to keep tears from her eyes, keep herself from getting emotional, “I thought, just for a moment, that he had killed you. I thought not again . I can’t deal with another daughter gone.” She hears the soft burp from the babe’s mouth, but continues to hold him there anyway.

That’s the first time Serena ever vocalized that she thought of her as her full blown daughter, not only like one. The corner of Charlotte’s mouth turns up slightly, “I’m sorry you experienced that. The very last thing I’d ever want is to rehash old emotional scars for you.” She moves back to the refrigerator, tugging it open again to remove a few other ingredients. “I suppose it’s some sort of...Stockholm Syndrome for me when it comes to him.”

That thought had never occurred to Serena, and it seems to click when the young woman says it.
“Possibly.”

“I wouldn’t go out of my way to tend to him or anything like that.” Charlotte shakes her head, “I just...I don’t want him to die alone. No one deserves to die alone, no matter how appealing the thought with some people.” The young woman continues to focus on the food in front of her. “I know you like your steak to be a bit more well done, but this is filet mignon and I’m not letting you kill this poor cow twice.” She hears the woman’s soft chuckle.

“Garlic and rosemary?”

“Garlic and thyme, close though.” Charlotte turns the oven on.

“You’re doing quite a bit just for the two of us.” Serena shakes her head, furrowing her brow a bit, “Filet mignon for lunch?”

“I reckon we deserve it.” Char shrugs, “tomato relish with a mayo and mustard mix for the bread. Go big or go home.” She announces, garnering her son’s attention finally, “Right, Cole? Only twenty minutes, if that. Not much at all.” She moves behind the other woman, leaning down to kiss the boy’s mostly bald head, covered in a self-created light brunette mohawk. “Want me to get Gwen cleaned up?”

“May just be easier to toss her straight in the bath.” Serena glances toward the still small girl as she gulps from her sippy-cup of milk. “Every meal is like this with her. I don’t understand how a thirteen-month-old makes such a mess with two neat freak parents.”

“First act of rebellion?” Char smirks, returning to the stove. She opens the oven door, sliding the pan into the appliance nonchalantly, “Good on you, Gwennie.” She closes the oven gently, smiling toward her pseudo-niece as she carefully retracts her from the seat, trying not to get herself messy in the process, “We’ll be quick.”
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Upon hearing Anders confusion, Bernie realizes she's been left out of the loop.

Cameron attempts to protect his sister from an uncomfortable situation. Too little, too late.

Chapter Notes

19 weeks.

It's my Mom's birthday, so why not have an unexpected chapter?

Fletch smirks a little when he sees the messy haired blonde consultant stepping toward the nurses’ station of Darwin ward. “Sight for sore eyes, you are. What calls for you to grace us with your presence?” His sleeves rolled up on his dress shirt, arms folded.

“I was called for a trauma consult...very begrudgingly by Dr. Dunn.” Bernie answers with an amused expression on her face, “Any idea where I may be able to find him?”

Absently motioning to the secluded room with a security guard outside of the door, he quickly realizes his mistake when she begins walking over, “Uh, Bernie, hold on a moment. He should be out shortly.”

Bernie turns when her friend beckons her to stop, “Right, I’m just going to let him know I’m here.”

“I’m sure he knows of your prompt ways-”

“Fletch.” She warns, sighing a little when he appears defeated. Bernie walks back over toward the door, showing the guard her badge before looking through the window, realizing quickly who is lying there in the bed. She pushes the door open, sliding her hands into her pockets once inside and garnering the men’s attention.
“Mum-” Cameron starts, standing quickly from his position beside the bed, taking a moment to correct himself, “Ms. Wolfe, I see you’ve arrived for that consult.” She won’t recognize the man in the bed, he hopes, knowing it’s pointless really. It’s the look she gives him that causes him to look away.

Bernie slowly folds her arms across her chest, “Didn’t realize you were in this unit, Anders.” A wry smirk covers her face as she sets her eyes onto him, “Must say, you’ve looked better.”

“Cancer and a heart that’s falling apart will do that.” Anders watches her, not really moved by her entrance to the room. I could swim in her eyes, his brain goes to thoughts of the woman he has never stopped loving. “Though it beats for you.”

Raising an eyebrow, “Okay then.” Bernie glances to her son, “Is this the patient you called me about?”

“No, actually.” Cameron shakes his head, moving toward her and motioning toward the door to the room, “We can just-”

“Char, aren’t you staying?” Anders’ eyes soften, looking out toward the woman, “I...we can have tea. I can ask them for tea. Please...please, stay today.” His heart rate begins to quicken and his head slumps a little, “Charlotte, please.”

“Quiet.” Bernie’s authoritative stance calls to him, not wanting to show the man any sort of compassion since he isn’t deserving of it, especially from her. Not after the hell he put her daughter and Serena through. The last thing she wants to do is to help him.

Pathetically reaching his hand out toward her, “Char...please...” Anders seems afraid for one reason or another. His hand trembling, a pallor to his skin, bead of sweat forming at his brow. “Please stay with me.”

Cameron remains silent, not wanting to give up his sister in this instance and definitely not wanting his patient to die because she wouldn’t hold his hand. “What if I stay, Andy? We can talk about your parents again...how they would take you to Greece.”

“Sorry, mate. I just...I need my wife.”
“Oh for god sake.” Bernie murmurs under her breath, better me than Char. “I’m not going to hold your hand.” She moves closer to him, taking the seat beside the bed, “Give me a run down on the patient, Cam.” She folds her arms across her chest, hearing the heart monitor of the man next to her starting to calm ever so slightly. Bernie is not enjoying this in the least, but she wouldn’t jeopardize her son’s patient, even though it’s Anders Hero.

“Seems like a torture situation.” Cam finds this whole situation to be an odd one, but he maintains a poker face. “Definite blunt force trauma to the chest cavity. Knife wounds next to the sternum, even cutting through several ribs. Almost as if the perpetrator was trying to saw through the area. I’ve...literally never seen anything like it before.”

“I’m intrigued.” Bernie nods, “How about we get a sedative going?” A subtle nod motions to the man in the bed who is staring at her, but she gives no real attention to.

“Let me get that file for you.” Cameron moves through the door as quickly as he can before the woman can stop him. He removes his mobile from his pocket as he makes his way to the nurses’ station, shooting his sister a text, I think you need to tell Mum about your visits. Anders is asking for you. Kind of holding Mum hostage.

Charlotte furrows her brow, stepping off the elevator as she makes her way toward the room anyway, she glances around, noticing her brother at the nursing station. She holds her mobile up, signaling that she just received his text message. “Hostage?”

“Well...kind of?” Cam tilts his head to the side, grabbing the file he needs to and tucking it under his arm, “He thinks she’s you.”

Of course he does, Charlotte thinks. “Okay.” She nods, “Well, I’ll take care of things and hear the...I’ll just hear it from her later.” She lifts her hand, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, “I already told Serena last week, so maybe it won’t be so bad...she can talk Mum down.” She shrugs, “I honestly don’t care at this point. He’s...just really sad now. Like a kid.”

“You and I know that, but she doesn’t.” Cameron watches her, “Didn’t exactly part on good terms last time.”

“No, not really, she had him pinned to the floor.” Char steps over to the room, pushing the door open. Her mother seems surprised that she’s standing there, but she instead begins speaking to the man in the bed, quickly plastering a smile on her face, “Hey there, handsome. Were you having a good chat with my Mum?” She gently rubs his lower leg through the blanket.
Anders turns his head toward her, smiling proudly when he spots Charlotte in front of him. “She doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m certain she’s just tired. Surgeons have very important jobs and they work very long hours.” Charlotte nods to him, “I just need to speak outside the door with her for only a moment and I’ll be right back, promise.” She gently takes her mother’s hand as she notices him nod, pulling her from the room, waiting for the door to close before she begins to speak, “Look, I know you’re going to be cross with me-”

“I just want to know what the hell is going on.” Bernie’s eyes are wide, not liking the feeling of being in the dark about anything, especially when it comes to her family. “Why are you here?”

“Because this is what I do.” Charlotte swallows, the same height as her mother, it helps her look the woman in the eye, “I don’t expect you to understand and that’s okay. We can talk about it later. I know you’re probably busy right now.”

“You better believe we’ll talk later.” Bernie’s voice low, the same voice she always used when her children were in trouble as they were growing up. She maintains her folded arms position, not about to back down where the young woman was concerned.

“Ms. Wolfe.” Cameron attempts to draw her attention from the situation by offering her the folder, “Mr. Lutzgrove, the patient I called you about, is just over here.” He begins to lead the way, knowing his mother would follow behind, even though she probably wanted to stay and give his sister the tenth degree. “Please, go easy on her.”

“I’ll go as easy or as hard on her as I feel I should.” Bernie answers quietly, opening the folder.

Cam sighs a little, removing his mobile from his pocket to send off another text. Sorry, I tried.

I know. Charlotte nods a little, exhaling slowly before entering Anders’ room again.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

An argument between Bernie and Charlotte upsets Serena.

Charlotte realizes it may be time for her and Cole to leave.

Chapter Notes

Same night as last chapter.

“So you lied to me.” Bernie stares her daughter down, hands on her hips. “You left Cole with Greta today, who already has her hands full with Gwen, to go and do what...snuggle with your abusive ex? I don’t understand why you would tell me you were at school when you-”

“I never told you that.” Charlotte stands in front of her mother, arms folded across her chest.

“-were sneaking away to Holby. Why would you hold yourself back?” Bernie’s eyes widened, unsure if she’s angry or just disappointed that she was able to be duped. “Why would you go back to him after everything he’s done to you?” She shakes her head, “everything he’s done to our family?”

“He doesn’t remember anything.” She shakes her head, “He knows none of it. He hardly even knows who he actually is anymore. Anders has the virtual mentality of a child at this point. He talks about when he was growing up. He talks about his parents and going to Greece when he was younger to visit the rest of his family. There’s no romance, Mum. It’s just me...He just wants me. Anders knows I can be trusted.” Char exhales slowly, “He becomes afraid...and he cries because he’s in pain. He doesn’t understand what’s happening to himself anymore. Not really.”

She can’t deny that. The man who she held on the ground on Boxing Day thought she was her daughter today. He wasn’t all there mentally anymore, not that he ever was to begin with, but now is a completely different story. Bernie turns away from her daughter, “I need a drink.” She starts to walk toward the doorway of the lounge.

“No, just talk. Just finish talking, please.” Charlotte follows after her mother. “Don’t...don’t just walk away. I don’t like waiting when it comes to this. I just want to finish.”
“Finish what, Charlotte? Telling you that I’m disappointed in your decisions? That I wish you would use that beautiful brain you own, and have already worked so hard to improve, only to just have you revert back to...that. That horrible life.” Bernie shakes her head, her voice raised ever so slightly. “What about Cole? Plan to play happy family again?” She looks away a little, not knowing how she planned to continue, and almost immediately regretting her choice of words.

“He is never coming-” The young woman shakes her head, chuckling softly to herself, almost bitterly, “You’re never going to let that go.” She starts to walk away from her mother, toward the stairs, “It’s fine. I’ll get what I can, and I’ll take my son, and we’ll go to the house...my house, the other house.” She has angry tears in her eyes, not making eye contact with her mother before jogging up the rest of the stairs.

“Shit.” Bernie hisses to herself, running a hand through her hair. She takes a moment before walking to the kitchen, pouring herself a small glass of scotch.

Serena hears the argument, how could she not. She gently rocks her grandson in the confines of his nursery, the boy cuddling against her. She feels herself growing upset, but tries to keep it relatively small. Carrying the boy, she makes her way to her step-daughter’s room, “Charlotte.”

“It’s fine, Serena. It was due to happen sometime.” Charlotte pulls the neon colored duffle from her closet, picking out a few pairs of trousers and tops to shove in the bag. “We’ll be fine.” She brings a hand to her face, wiping away a tear that has somehow managed to escape her eye. She doesn’t talk about how that place terrifies her. Wondering if the few holes in the walls created by Anders’ fists were patched. “There’s plenty of space. I was just being ridiculous by not going there right away.”

Moving closer to the younger woman, Serena gently places a hand on Charlotte’s upper arm, surprised when the young woman leans her head against her, breaking into a sob. “You don’t need to go anywhere. This is your home, Charlotte.” When the babe in her other arm reaches his chubby hand across to pat his mother’s head, she smiles to herself, “Just unpack your things-”

“I can’t. I’ve already told Mum I was going and I don’t go back on my word.” Char shakes her head, turning her head to the side to offer a sad smile to her son. “I don’t expect her to understand, I don’t expect anyone to.”

“I know. I don’t understand your reasoning, but I understand that you feel you need to do this. I understand you, Charlotte.” Serena offers the young woman her son, “Sit down, relax. Let me go and make us some tea.”
Char holds Cole tenderly and feels the corner of her mouth lifting up slightly when the boy begins to hold onto her just as much. “Tea would be...nice. Thank you.” Her voice small, nervous almost.

Serena leaves the room, a pointed look about her as she descends the stairs and rounds them at the bottom. She makes a beeline toward the kitchen, “Berenice.”

Bernie swirls the amber colored liquid around in the glass, her eyes glassy. “I know.” Her voice weak. She lifts the glass to her lips, taking a sip before placing it back onto the counter top. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, if you don’t act fast enough, you’re going to lose her again.” Serena appears upset with her partner, “I don’t know what happened at hospital today, Cameron sent me a text message as a heads up, but I only understood bits and pieces. In actuality, they don’t matter.”

“He hurt you and she wants to coddle him.” Bernie’s voice just above a mumble, hoarse.

“She’s an adult. She’s capable of making her own decisions and our input is neither desired, nor required.” Serena keeps her arms at her side, “She’s ready to leave, do you understand that?”

“She wants to go.”

“No, Bernie, she doesn’t.”

Bernie falls silent again, taking another sip of her scotch, “You didn’t hear her.”

“I did. She didn’t mean what she said and you know it.” Serena scowls slightly, “Go and talk to her, please. Stop with this...pride mess. The both of you. Think of Cole. I know you like to handle his bottle at two in the morning. He’s used to that as well.” Her eyes begin to dampen, “I can’t bare to see them go just yet.”

Moving close to her girlfriend, Bernie gently places a kiss at the corner of her mouth. She stands there a moment before walking past her. She ascends the stairs and knocks on the doorframe to her daughter’s bedroom though the door is ajar. “Char, I’d like to talk to you.” She pushes the door open more, glancing over toward her daughter.
“You’ve said enough.” Charlotte lies in bed with her son, using her hand to trace his facial features as she hums softly to him, lulling him toward sleep. “You made your opinion known and...I told you of my plans.” Her voice soft, noncommittal. She bites her lip, hoping her mother doesn’t see the tear that just escaped her eye. “It’s fine, Mum. I’ll get ready to go in a moment.”

“I don’t want you to go, though.” Bernie says softly, “I really don’t.”

“I don’t know what you want.” Char wipes her eye this time, the baby’s eyelids heavy as she gently strokes his eyebrows with her knuckle. “I don’t want to go to school just yet. I don’t need to. Cole is only almost five months old.” The baby snuggles against her more, reaching up and taking hold of her hand like a stuffed animal.

Bernie glances down toward the floor, remembering how she couldn’t wait to get away when Cameron was young. Not that she necessarily wanted to, but she needed to for her own mental health. He was a bit older than Cole, yes, but it is still fresh in her mind. Maybe Charlotte’s visits to Holby is her way of getting away from the situation. Nothing drastic, but something she just needs to do. “You’re right. I apologize.”

Char’s chin trembles a little, finally glancing over toward her mother. “I love you, Mum...I don’t like when we argue.”

“Agreed.” Bernie looks over toward her daughter, a soft smile growing on her own face as she takes in the sight of Char and Cole, “I love you too...even if I don’t say it nearly enough.”

“Good.” Charlotte lifts her hand to wipe away her cheek, “So, can we please just...calm down?”

Knowing her daughter has never really liked confrontation, but also never backed away from it, Bernie nods. She walks around to her daughter’s side of the bed, leaning over to kiss her temple. She lifts her hand to gently smooth down Charlotte’s hair afterwards. “Of course.”

“Mum...can you just, um, stay for a bit?” Char’s voice rough, just needing her mother close even though she’s an adult. Her mother’s presence has always comforted her, especially after all the time that she was away in the past. It was like an entirely different existence when Bernie was home. Her father was an entirely different man.

Bernie smirks a bit, more amused at her daughter’s childlike nature when it comes to comfort than anything else. She wonders how the young woman felt during the time she lived with Anders Hero,
but sets it into the back of her mind, knowing she needs to worry of the present instead. Stepping over to the opposite side of the bed, she lies down, keeping her grandson between them. “You know, I mostly want you to stay so I could keep going with his bottle feedings in the morning.”

It causes Charlotte to give an amused grin as she struggles to keep a chuckle from her voice, “I’d expect no less.”
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Serena slips up during a visit to her therapist.

Annette Vickers helps her patient understand a past event may have affected her more than she originally thought.

Chapter Notes

20 weeks.

Of course I was going to post something for Valentine's Day. OF COURSE. However, it isn't anything terribly...romantic. I'm sorry. These were written forever ago and I forgot to match up certain days other than Christmas (I'm now trying to lay out Easter, which doesn't happen until two plus months from now).

ANYWAY.

Happy Valentine's Day!

I forgot to include your visual casting for the character of Dr. Annette Vickers, she's going to come up quite a few times throughout the story. Incredibly learned doctor who changes her treatment styles based on each patient. She's the consultant for a reason, but does have a few patients she sees on the regular, usually as favors to others. Annette Vickers is played by Mary McDonnell.
“So, you have a baby in the house again.” Psychiatric Consultant Annette Vickers sits in front of her patient, studying the woman’s reactions and actually taking an interest in what the woman is currently saying. “How has that been going?” She had helped her through the death of her daughter when she was coming to her for a bit, before she removed herself from the situation and went to France.

“My grandson, Cole...well, Bernie’s grandson. Yes, he’s...absolutely perfect in every way. With such an...awful creation, I’m absolutely impressed by how amazing he is.” Serena starts to beam, thinking of the small boy, “He’s twenty weeks old...and I can hardly remember anything before him.” She tilts her head to the side, “and Guinevere, Jason’s little one, is absolutely smitten with him. Not much older than he is and she always wants to help.” She explains, folding her arms comfortably around herself.

“How have you felt with Charlotte in the house?” When Serena gives a look as if she doesn’t understand the question, Vickers nods, “Let me rephrase that. You mentioned during a previous session...about a year or so ago, after Charlotte had just moved in with you, that you were finding it hard to cope with her presence-”

Serena nods a little, “Yes, but...I think we’ve had the opportunity to become more acquainted since then. She isn’t as...frightened.” She pauses, tilting her head to the side, “that isn’t the right word. She’s become more trusting of me...and I of her. I don’t think my issue was so much trust as it was uncertainty though. I was afraid for her. I had seen her bruises. I had gotten the sense that...she was
going through her own personal war.” She licks her lips, shrugging, “I understood that she was...broken, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t mendable.”

“That’s a beautiful way to put it.” Vickers nods a little, smiling slightly. Her American accent always amuses Serena and she can never figure out why. “I’ve made a deal with her. We speak over video conference once a week or twice if she needs it...until she’s ready to come to the office.”

“I’m more of a face-to-face kind of girl.”

“I’ve noticed.” Vickers adjusts her sitting position, “Do you think the same of yourself? That you were broken and are now on the mend?”

Serena shakes her head negatively, “It’s more complicated than that.”

“A different kind of mend.”

“Elinor knows about all we’ve went through together in regards to the ex and...my reservations with some of her decisions, but...I can look past those. Everyone has their own way of coping.” Serena explains, not wanting to mention that she thinks of Charlotte as her own daughter most times.

Vickers had caught the slip of the tongue. Her possible inability to differentiate between her feelings for Charlotte and that of Elinor, “The Japanese have a technique where they repair broken pottery with gold or silver. That way it doesn’t overlook what the pottery has gone through and serves to visibly incorporate the repair into the history of the piece instead of disguising it. I think that’s a good way to look at...the healing process as a whole.”

Serena doesn’t know what to say to that or even if she should say anything at all. “I feel like I lose myself sometimes.”

“I can tell.” Vickers nods slowly, “You just referred to Charlotte as Elinor...however, I think her presence is actually helping you.”

“I don’t...I don’t think of her like that. I don’t think of her as Ellie.” It pains Serena that she could possibly make the mistake.
“It’s okay.” Vickers explains, “Both you and Char are going through your own sense of rehabilitation...and that’s totally fine. Better than fine. I’d be worried if you hadn’t started speaking to someone, me or otherwise.” She leans back in her chair, comfortably folding her arms. “However, attempting to just...ignore the pain and the feelings of emptiness is never going to make it go away...it will just make it bigger and harder to repair.”

“In my position, it isn’t something that-”

“You’re going to have to, Serena.” Vickers tilts her head to the side, “Make it a part of you instead of attempting to cover it up. Acknowledge the feeling and accept it, but don’t allow it to overwhelm you. I know you’re great at doing that...separating yourself from the situation.” She offers a soft smile, “How has Bernie been through all this?”

“I...I try to figure out, on a regular basis, how I’ve gotten so lucky.” Serena finds herself blushing a little, “she’s the most loving human being I’ve ever met...though she doesn’t like to let a lot of people know that.” She huffs a soft chortle to herself, “I think she’s gotten better since we’ve been together...especially with her children. Jason has always thought the world of her though...even before she became more open about her feelings.”

“It seems she makes you happy.” The therapist tilts her head to the side, smiling a bit. “That’s fantastic.”

“She does. I don’t know where I’d be without her.” Serena lifts her hand to the hair at her temple to run her own nails through it, absently.

“Let’s change gears a bit, shall we?” Upon seeing her patient nod, Vickers continues, “How have you been sleeping?”

The question causes Serena to fall quiet for a moment, “Well...it’s getting better, I believe.”

“What time have you been falling asleep at night?”

Serena thinks for a moment, “Around eleven? I spend a bit of time with Cole to wind down before putting him to sleep. We rock in his chair and relax a bit. He takes the time to babble to me about his day.” She huffs her amusement to herself, “Bernie gets in late. Sometimes I’ll feel her get into bed, sometimes I won’t, but it works for us.”
“And do you dream when you finally get yourself to sleep?” Vickers comfortably lounges in the chair, noticing her patient’s nod again, “Let’s talk about that.”

“About my dreams?” Serena raises an eyebrow, “I don’t really see what-”

“Some think dreams are the subconscious’ way of dealing with the things that happen to us as a whole. A way of sorting through the things that happen to us safely.” She explains, “However, nightmares occur and those are the things we can work on in our waking hours.”

“Like what?” Hearing that theory previously, she isn’t very certain of the factuality to it. Serena shrugs a little, “I’m not here about dreams.”

“Except you are.” Vickers nods, “You’re here about a lot of things.”

Serena clears her throat, “My dreams don’t matter.”

“Just entertain me.”

Sighing heavily, Serena rolls her eyes a little, “They’re always about Boxing Day...and when they aren’t about Boxing Day, they’re about Elinor.”

“Boxing Day...this past Boxing Day?” Vickers had a feeling that’s exactly what it would be about, “When you were attacked?” Seeing her patient’s nod again, she continues, “What happens?”

She pauses, not really wanting to bring it up if she doesn’t need to. “He’s beating Charlotte. There’s no end to it. Going until she’s a bloody pulp and...I’m almost certain he kills her.” Serena licks her lips a little, thinking back to the dream she has had nearly every single night since the date in question, “And I’m sitting there...helpless. I can’t...help her. I can only watch. I don’t know why I don’t stop him.”

“Are you able to control yourself in these dreams?” Vickers tilts her head to the side, “Are you aware of what’s going on or is it a static thing that doesn’t change? Like a movie.”

“Bit of both.”
“So, you’re aware of what’s about to happen...but it also works like a movie?”

“Exactly.” Serena nods slowly, “I wish I could...move on. Stop going over it.”

“Why do you think that is all that continues to run through your head?” Vickers leans forward, showing more interest.

Serena shrugs again, “I’ve no idea.” It shows on her face that the entire idea bothers her and that she’s seen it far too many times. “She’s started seeing him again...I don’t think it’s in a romantic sense, but...it really makes me worry that he’ll hurt her again.” She swallows nervously, “and that the nightmare will come true.”

“Have you spoken to Charlotte about these dreams?”

“I couldn’t possibly.” Serena answers softly, “She has enough on her plate as it is and-”

“I want you to try.” Vickers says confidently, “I believe both you and Charlotte can help one another with it.” When Serena appears confused by the thought, she continues, “You aren’t the only one having issues with this.” The doctor sighs softly, knowing her patient would understand what she was referring to without outright saying so.

Serena casually folds her arms over her chest, remembering at that moment that Charlotte sees this same therapist. She swallows, the thought never crossed her mind that Charlotte may be having a hard time with not only Boxing Day a few months ago, but life in general, both her life currently and her life previously. “Okay.” Her answer simple, yet in recognition of the concept. They would need to work together in order to help one another know they weren’t alone in their issues.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Charlotte says goodbye to someone who has helped her in the past.

Cameron realizes his sister is having a harder time with things than she's let on.

“I’m really disappointed to see you go.” Charlotte nurses a glass of scotch in her hand, the sphere of ice clanging around the sides with each little movement.

“Off to bigger and better things.” Leah nods, staring the other young woman down, “How about you? Your parents were saying you’ve returned to school to take up the reigns, so to speak.” She offers a kind smile, “Never thought of you as a surgeon.”

“You never asked and I don’t either.” The young mother explains, “No, I’m not really sure yet. I think I’d be a better nurse than anything.” She shrugs, “I haven’t started going to school yet though. They were mistaken...and I didn’t hear the end of it. Trust me.” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, a smirk beginning to grow on her face. “Tonight, though, tonight my parents are watching the baby, but they send their best-”

“I highly doubt Serena Campbell wishes me the best.”

“She does. Believe it or not.” Char pauses, “I believe her words were, *she was a pain, but she has promise*.”

Leah begins to giggle, taking another sip of her bottled beer, “Sounds about right.”

“Take your compliments as they come.” She motions to Dom and Lofty, “I think you have some other guests. Don’t let me take all of your time.” Char knows Leah was starting to grow intoxicated, that’s the Holby Goodbye. Smiling to herself, she turns back toward the bar when the guest of honor toddles off, only noticing then the other figure next to her, “I thought you were heading home after your shift.”

Cameron shrugs, “Where’s the fun in that?” He smirks, “Besides, Leah was actually pretty great when she helped out on Darwin. Sad to see her go...even if she had the hots for Stepmum.”
“Did I tell you about that?” Char furrows her brow, honestly not remembering. She was beginning to feel the scotch, as she had an expectation that she would. “Doesn’t matter. I honestly don’t think she meant anything by it. Like, when you’re sweet on a professor or something at Uni.”

“But you dated one of your professors at Uni. Didn’t you?”

“What is it, *remind Charlotte of all her mistakes in life* night?” Char was teasing mostly, but she lifts her hand to her hair, running it through. “Go ahead, run them all out.” Maybe a part of her means it, maybe a part of her is angry he even brought it up, “Kirk was very sweet, by the way.”

“And married.” Cam raises an eyebrow, accepting the bottle of beer from the barkeep when it’s handed over. He quickly takes a sip, “Had a daughter a couple years older than you, didn’t he?” When she doesn’t respond, he continues, “Also a son...who, if I remember correctly, asked you out first, but...you’ve daddy issues.”

“Do I? So you’ve added a psych degree to your educational achievement repertoire?” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, “Shall we bring up Keeley?”

“Okay, I’ll stop.” Cam sighs ever so slightly. “I’m surprised to see you here, actually. I never realized you knew Leah as well as you, apparently, do.”

“She uh...” Char exhales slowly, “Helped me out of a tough spot.” The young woman begins to slowly swirl the amber colored liquid in her glass, almost absently. Her mind drifts, but she attempts to hold it still as best she can. A glass crashes to the floor from behind the bar and she flinches, unable to hold herself back. Her eyes suddenly well up with tears, “I um...I reckon it’s time for me to go.”

“Wait, I just got here.” Cameron notices the sudden change in his sister’s behavior, “Char-” When she stands, he sweetly places a hand on her upper arm and only then he feels that she’s shaking. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing wrong. I’ve just...had too many. I’ll order an Uber and head on home.” Charlotte offers him her best attempt at a reassuring smile, “I swear, Cam. I only popped over to say goodbye to Dr. Faulkner, which I’ve done, and now I’m going home. Possibly stop and grab some food, but otherwise-”
“I’ll let you go, but...you’re lying.” He notices her uneasiness, “I’m not as blind as you think I am.” Cam removes his hand from her arm, facing forward again, taking another sip of his beer. “Don’t know why you’d lie to me...I’ve never lied to you.”

“Because you’re getting on my nerves, DS Cameron.” Char rolls her eyes, aware that her brother knows the exact way to get at her, especially with stuff like this. “I’ve um...been having trouble sleeping. So...I’m tired now. The scotch works wonders.”

“Okay.” Cam replies, smirking slightly to himself, “Goodnight then.”

She folds her arms, “I don’t know what you expect me-”

“Why are you having trouble sleeping?”

“I’m a single mother attempting to take care of my son-” Charlotte starts, knowing that wasn’t going to work with her brother, “I’m just stressed.” She shrugs, “I don’t really...know otherwise.” She’s spoken to her therapist many times of her dreams and other issues plaguing her. She knew. “Promise.” Technically, it wasn’t a lie.

“Not to sound so cliche, but you can talk to me whenever you need to.” Cam nods, “Ask me for help, whatever. You know that, right?”

“And you know I’ll never ask you for help, right?”

“It was worth a shot.” Cameron smiles a bit more, finally glancing over to his sister, “Really though. I will always be there for you and Cole, Char. Okay?” Noticing his sister’s subtle nod, he continues, seeing another flinch from the young woman when someone slams their glass a little too hard on a table, playful, but noisy. “Want a lift home? I can just finish this beer, give a quick goodbye to Leah, and we can go.”

Charlotte swallows before nodding, “Thank you.” Giving the barkeep a subtle smirk for him to fill her glass again, her third drink. Anything to help her sleep at this point. She’s been downing them too quickly, though. She knows they’ll catch up with her, it’s only a matter of when.
Cameron gently gathers his sister up in his arms from her place within the passenger seat of his beat up sedan. Never in one place long enough to see reason on spending much on a car. He closes the passenger side door behind him with a nudge of his hip, carrying her up the stairs to the house his mother shares with her partner. Char may have chugged down another two glasses of scotch in the hour he sat with her, holding her hand within the confines of Albie’s. He’s certain people probably thought they were being weird, but he honestly didn’t care. He’d do whatever he could for his little sister. Lifting his head as he heard footsteps walking up to the door from within. It wasn’t late, only a bit after ten. When the door opens, he offers one of his cheeky grins, “I think I have something that belongs to you.”

Serena doesn’t seem the least bit surprised, especially after what her therapist said earlier in the day. She sighs a bit, stepping aside to let the young man through the door. “You can set her on the sofa if you—”

“I’ll just take her up to bed.” Cameron nods, a hint of worry behind his eyes and he knows his near stepmother can probably pick up on it. “Five glasses of scotch...very quickly.” He can hear her walking behind him, “I’m surprised she wasn’t fumbling around Albie’s.”

“Five glasses of scotch?” Serena shakes her head a little, watching the young woman’s form as Cam gently lays her on top of her bed covers. “Did you try to stop her before that?”

“She’d have another in her hand before I had the opportunity to.” He sighs softly, “Listen...I uh...” Cam cautiously covers his sister with the quilt covering her bed, motioning to the door after for them both to head out, “I’m worried about her. Is Mum around?”
Serena tilts her head toward her own bedroom, “Fell asleep with Cole in her arms. Most adorable thing I’ve ever seen. Can’t be bothered to wake either of them in order to move him.” She motions toward the stairway with a quick sway of her hand, “Cup of tea?” Upon his nod, she leads the way, “Did you have much to drink?”

“Just a bottle of beer. Only one.” Cameron answers honestly, knowing she would reprimand him otherwise, “Promise.”

Waiting until they finally enter the kitchen space, Serena answers, “Okay.” Her voice relatively quiet, having a feeling she knows what this is all about. “I may not be your mother, but you can talk to me about what’s worrying you if you wish, Cameron. As you well know.”

Cam nods a little, leaning against the kitchen island, “It’s about Char. I know the two of you have grown closer over the past year...and you know her pretty well.” He watches as the woman occupies herself at putting the kettle on, opting for a loose leaf tea in a cylindrical metal container to infuse their hot water. Cam stares, “Has she...been okay with you lately?”

“Been okay, how?”

He sighs a little, “While we were at Albie’s...she was jumpy. Then a glass had broken and she was ready to chase pavements.” Cam watches the other woman for a moment, “So, I guess it’s my fault she had the two other drinks, but I didn’t want her wandering around Holby all by herself in the dark.”

Serena listens to him, before nodding slowly, “I’m...worried about her, yes.”

Noticing when she doesn’t go into details, he knows there’s more to it than just that. “Has she been okay with Cole?”

“She’s absolutely fine with Cole, I think it has everything to do with her ongoing whatever with Anders Hero.” When the kettle whistles, she pours the hot water into the teapot, along with the metal container holding the fresh, loose leaf tea, “He causes her...anxious behavior to go through the roof. I don’t understand why she’s willing to put herself through any of that again, but she does.”

Cam sighs softly, nodding, “He’s incredibly sweet to staff when Char or myself are there. Goes silent or combative when we aren’t. It’s absolutely puzzling to me.” Glancing down when she places a mug in front of him, smirking with amusement at the Army fatigue print Best Gran mug,
remembering when his mother was presented it as a gift for her birthday from Jason and his family. “He also couldn’t differentiate between Char and Mum...which was far more amusing to me than it was to either of them.”

Serena takes a moment before responding, “It isn’t good for her to be there.”

“I agree.”

“Did you tell her?” Serena finally pours the tea into the two mugs after it had seeped for a couple moments, “I’m a firm believer that the truth will work almost every time.”

“So why didn’t you tell her that you don’t like it then?” Cameron meets the woman’s eyes, “You’ve had more experience with him than you give yourself credit for. None of which are positive.” He takes a sip of his tea, expensive tea. He doesn’t even need milk or sugar for it.

“I asked first.”

The young man swallows, taking a moment to sort his thoughts before speaking, “She doesn’t seem...upset or affected while she’s there with him. She’s...loving and...” Cam shakes his head, “He isn’t all there anymore. The cancer doing quite the number on him...I’m just waiting for him to turn into a vegetable at this point.”

Taking a sip of her tea and savoring it for a moment, she finally speaks, “You weren’t here on Boxing Day.” Serena glances away from him, suddenly finding the window of the back door very interesting, “She spoke as if it were common occurrence, but she...attempted to save me then. Demanding to take a beating just so that I wouldn’t be the object of his anger.” Serena appears as if she’s lost in her thoughts.

“So, what...you think this is some sort of PTSD?” Cameron furrows his brow slightly, “The flinching?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a psychologist.” Her voice is softer than it was previously, “Your Mum has moments...from when she was...” Serena knows she doesn’t really need to continue, “It’s common for veterans, but...if Charlotte has a touch of it I would understand.”

He never thought of that. Not Boxing Day, not what his sister went through before that when she
was in a romantic relationship with Anders Hero. Cam couldn’t. Not with being the one in charge of his treatment. The man was a shell of his former self. Hardly the man who tried to kill his sister. Anders adored Char now. “Have you spoken to her about Boxing Day?” He sees the small scar on his stepmother’s lip, remembering the sight of his mother stitching it up on her own.

Serena closes her eyes at the mention, shaking her head negatively. “She has enough on her plate to talk feelings. Besides, I’d rather not bring it up with her if it’s—”

“I think you might need to.” Cam reaches a hand out to place on her wrist, surprising the both of them, “I know it will be hard for you, but...I think you need to.” He repeats, looking her in the eye when she finally faces him again.

Bernie stands in the doorway, bleary eyed and her grandson in her arm, “Bonding, are we?”

“Nope, just trying to nick your girl out from under you.” Cameron pulls his hand back, giving his mother a teasing smirk. He holds his hands out for his nephew, who seems groggy, yet fussy. Raising an eyebrow when the boy pouts toward him, holding onto his Gran more. “Fine, be that way.”

“Teething...and he’s just so tired. Skipped right over his afternoon nap.” Bernie explains, making her way to the refrigerator, tugging it open. “Maybe a bottle...and some scotch on his gums should do the trick.”

“You are not putting scotch on the baby’s gums.” Serena offers a light scowl, “Anbesol gel should work just fine. That’s why I bought it in the first place. It’s in his nappy bag.”

“We’ll do it your way.” Bernie sighs dramatically, being playful with her partner, “but scotch worked just fine on my two when they were small.”

“Expects why Char has a taste for it.” Cameron chuckles to himself, taking another sip of tea. “I’d better get going.” He gives a nod to both the women and takes a moment to kiss his nephew’s hairline as he passes by, making his way to the front door.

“What did he mean by that?” The blonde furrows her brow.

“Probably nothing.” Serena gives a gentle smile, a part of her amused with their grandson and the
pitiful look covering his face. “However, you go ahead and get back to bed. I’ll tend to him—”

“Char home yet?” Bernie furrows her eyes, they’re heavy with exhaustion.

“Asleep. Cameron brought her home. She’ll probably have one hell of a hangover in the morning.” Serena gently takes the cranky baby from his grandmother’s arms, “Go on to bed. I’ll bring him back up with us when I get him settled a bit.” She pecks her fiance’s lips, “I know you love a good cuddle with him in the morning.”

Bernie gives a sheepish smirk, “I do.”

“Pop you go.” Serena watches as her partner shuffles her way back to the stairs before looking down at the baby who was fiercely attempting to chew his fist. “Don’t you worry, Cole. Everything will be just fine.” If only she believed that herself.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

Charlotte realizes Serena cares for her more than she originally thought.

Bernie shows her partner some support.

Chapter Notes

Day after last chapter.

Charlotte opens her eyes within the confines of her bright bedroom, pitifully whimpering at the pain it causes her. She realizes she was still wearing the pair of form fitting blue jeans and loose fitting jumper from the night prior. Closing her eyes again, she slaps her hand against the bedside table, glad her sunglasses were where she had left them. She slides them onto her face before opening her eyes once more, “Blimey.” Her body feels heavy, her head pounds, her stomach aches.

“Good morning!” Bernie calls out to her daughter after throwing the door open. Serena had told her about the night previously and how much she had to drink, according to Cameron.

Whimpering again, she turns over, shielding her eyes. “Come on, Mum.”

“I tried to stop her.” Serena says gently from behind her partner, “I’m so sorry, Charlotte.”

“You’re the worst.” Char pouts toward her mother, noticing the woman walking closer to her, offering a glass of water in one hand and two pills in the other,

“Come on, drink up. Better hydration will kill that hangover.” Bernie announces, keeping her voice bounding. She knows it’s causing her daughter a bit of pain, but it also amuses her. Remembering back to the days where she’d drink herself into a stupor just to forget about her problems and make out with random girls from her barracks while in various middle eastern countries, able to blame it on the alcohol.

“Berenice.” Serena scowls again, “Just put them on the nightstand and fetch the girl a cool cloth.”
She meets her partner’s eyes when Bernie glances back to her, “Go on.”

Bernie sees something in her partner’s eyes, knowing fully well this had nothing to do with the hangover. She knows there were things said between Cameron and Serena the night previously, but was only able to catch the tail end of it. It wasn’t much, but their hushed tones told her it was enough to know that it wasn’t a conversation they wanted her included in currently. “Fine.” Bernie sets the pills onto the nightstand, as well as the tall glass of water, “I’ll be right back.” She makes it a point to have her voice elevated, remembering her father doing the same to her the first time she became proper drunk at sixteen.

Watching as her partner stands from the bed, walking closer to her and the doorway she says quietly to her, “Also, check on Cole? He’s being rather quiet for watching Baby Einstein.” Serena smirks, knowing the boy always attempted to talk back to the brightly colored toys on the television as the voices in various languages counted and sang songs. With her quick nod, and weak smirk, Serena closed the door behind her, leaving only herself and Charlotte in the room. “She does like to have a go at you when you’re sloshed, doesn’t she?” Her tone soft, low.

“Always has.” Charlotte’s voice only just above a whisper as she finally pokes her head out from the covers, sunglasses still donning her face. She pushes herself up, knowing she would be safe with Serena. “She’s always done the same with Cam too.” Reaching over to the bedside table, she takes the ibuprofen pills and water. Water first, pills after. Char’s always had trouble swallowing pills since she was young and used her own method to do so, even if it perplexed those around her. “My mother is a sadist.”

Serena feels herself nearly chortle loudly, but keeps it to herself when she knows it will cause the young woman pain. “Cameron said you had a bit of a time last night.”

“I wanted to leave, but Cam wanted to finish his beer.” Sighing, Char continues, “I don’t remember much, to be honest.”

She nods, taking a seat on the side of the bed finally and folding her hands over her lap, “I’d think not after five glasses of scotch.” Serena watches the young woman’s face, wishing she could see her eyes. “Ms. Vickers may have...insinuated that you’ve been having some issues as of late-”

“What happened to Doctor-Patient confidentiality?”

“She didn’t outright say anything.” Serena swallows, not wanting to worry the young woman, “Nothing at all, just said that maybe we should talk.”
“About?” Char raises an eyebrow, taking another sip of her water, “How I can’t hear a door slam without jumping? About my dream of my mother being killed in action over in Afghanistan and this is all a figment of my imagination? Or the one with Anders choking me to death during sex?”

“Charlotte, that isn’t what—” Serena sighs, shaking her head, “That isn’t what I’m talking about.”

“No?”

“Well, maybe a little bit that first one. Cam is really worried about you and, I must admit, I am as well. Your mother doesn’t ever stop worrying about you, so I’m not including her in this.” Serena reaches out, placing a reassuring hand on the young woman’s knee through her bed linens. “I know you tell Annette all that you want, but...we were both affected here on Boxing Day. I still have nightmares about it...about you.” She never even told Bernie this, no one other than her therapist.

Charlotte lifts her head, her eyes meeting the other woman’s though she knows Serena isn’t able to tell. “Why do you have nightmares about me?”

“My daughter died. She was brilliant and young. Her death was avoidable, but...through a series of miscalculations, I lost her.” Serena swallows, managing to keep her wits about her as she speaks. “I, along with her father, removed her from the ventilator...and your Mum held me after we did.” Her eyes teary, but she maintains her regular voice, “My old nightmares were just that...playing over and over again in my head every single night.”

Swallowing, the young woman reaches a hand out, touching her stepmother’s arm, “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Serena nods a little, quickly bringing a hand up to wipe her eyes, “However, my nightmares now are...from Boxing Day. He’s beating you and I can’t save you. I lose you and Cole...and I can’t do anything. You’re bleeding and...crushed to a pulp. All because you told him to beat you instead of me.”

“Well, that didn’t happen though.” Charlotte swallows, moving up a little to embrace the woman, “It didn’t happen and we’re both here. You’re Cole’s Nan...and soon enough you’ll be my stepmum.” She holds Serena closely, closing her eyes when she feels the woman break down finally.

“Everything is okay. I’m still here.” Char lifts her head a little when she notices her mother open the bedroom door again. Her hand rubs over Serena’s back, then threads it through the woman’s hair. “You didn’t fail Elinor and you didn’t fail Cole...and you certainly didn’t fail me.”
Bernie bites her lip, watching the display in front of her. She glances over to her grandson in her arm, “Sorry to bother, but someone was very adamant that I not leave him alone.”

Serena sits up more, moving from Charlotte’s arms to reach for the boy. Really, he’s been her one saving grace. “Of course not.” She quickly brings a hand to her eye, wiping away whatever tears have formed. Gently taking the infant once her partner hands him over. She softly presses her lips against the babe’s soft hair.

“How about I make some breakfast-” Charlotte pauses, glancing to the clock on her bedside table, “Lunch? I’ll make lunch.”

Offering her daughter a thankful smirk, Bernie nods, “That sounds lovely. Though, I’m still rather jealous I didn’t get any of that steak sandwich. Serena still mentions it.”

“That was like...weeks ago.” Char smirks, standing carefully from the bed, “I’ll see what I can scrounge up...” She had purposefully brought more filet mignon just so she could make it when her mother was home. “Do you want crisps with it?”

“You spoil me.” Bernie watches as her daughter walks past. She stands there with her fiance, “You okay, Campbell?”

“I think I will be.” Serena swallows, glancing down to her grandson as she calms almost instantly, “Fish and chips night. We’ll have a full house in a few hours.” She needs it though. She needs to have them all close. “I bought Guinevere a new booster seat for her to sit at the table for a change.” Serena smiles softly, “and this mister can take the high chair-” She hums her amusement when the boy reaches up to squeeze her cheek, “-like the big boy that he is.” Serena snuggles his neck, hearing him belly laugh in her ear.

“I’m sure they’ll both love it.” Bernie moves around to the side of the bed, taking a seat next to her partner. She wraps her arm around the woman, smiling softly to herself when Serena rests her head on her shoulder. “He really does favor Char and I, doesn’t he?”

“Can’t ever deny that.” Serena shakes her head, “all in the eyes.” Glancing over to her partner, she leans in, tenderly kissing the woman next to her. “First thing I fell in love with...also that mop you call hair.” Hearing her partner snort her amusement, Serena gives a genuine smile, “I love you.”
“I love you more.” Bernie’s eyes soften, stealing another kiss before she hears her daughter yell for them from the lower level. “We’re being beckoned.”

Humming her approval, “I believe even Cameron is stopping by as well tonight.” Serena stands, still holding the happy boy in her arms. “So, when I say full house-”

“You mean it.” Nodding a little, Bernie follows along as they finally leave the room.
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

During some family time, Guinevere becomes a tad jealous.

Chapter Notes

I hope Guinevere is understandable around here. I think of her as rather precocious, thanks to her mother, so hopefully that helps.

This one happens on the same day as the last, just later that night.

22 weeks.

“Baby Co.” Guinevere stands over Cole’s bounce lounger, explaining to Cameron as if it’s the first time he’s ever seen his nephew. “He good baby.” She gently touches the infant’s hand as he rests in the lounger with her finger. “Un Cam.” She pats her uncle’s leg, making sure he’s paying attention.

“I see that. Your Nan and Gran say you’re very helpful.” Cameron raises an eyebrow, the girl always getting excited when she sees him and he’s never quite understood why. Not that he minds even the slightest bit. Chuckling a little when the girl climbs up into his lap, he hugs onto her when she does with him.

“Guinevere, please don’t bother your uncle too much.” Greta keeps her arms casually folded across her abdomen, no longer as nervous around her husband’s family as she once was, and not needing to keep her eyes glued to her mobile nearly as often. She offers Cole a smile, having never really held him other than when she babysat him, she reaches down to lift him from his place in the lounger. He’s larger than Gwen was at this age, smiling a little at how genuinely jovial he seems.

“Mama, no.” Gwen scowls toward her, disengaging herself from her Uncle’s arms to climb across the sofa toward her mother, “Co my baby. My you baby, k?”

“Cole is your cousin.” Greta corrects, “Sort of.” She glances down at the infant on her lap who is flapping his arms with excitement when he sees his own mother enter the room. “He isn’t your baby or my baby, he’s your Aunt Charlotte’s baby. You’re always going to be mine, so you’ve nothing to worry about.”
Charlotte smirks a little, hearing the girl’s worry. “Hey Gwen, would you like to help me with
desert? I need an assistant and I think you would be great for the job.” With the girl’s excited nod,
she gently takes her small hand, leading her toward the kitchen.

“I know you’re thinking about getting a house, Jason, but they are incredibly expensive.” Serena
takes a sip from her glass of wine as she hovers around the kitchen island with her partner and their
nephew. “Besides, having a house is not a be all and end all to family life. I didn’t move here until
Elinor was nearly ten. We lived in America before that, in a small flat.”

“But I think a house would be very good for us. It doesn’t need to be a large one, but it would be
ours.” Jason tries to explain, “I would like Gwen to have a place to play, and we’ve been thinking
about getting a dog.”

“I think a dog would be lovely. I’ve been trying to talk your Aunt into one.” Bernie waves her
eyebrows, taking her leave from the pair, knowing there wasn’t going to be any sort of movement on
the subject between them. She sees her daughter place Gwen on the counter top. “What are you two
up to?”

“My he’p!” Gwen announces toward her Gran, very excited even though she doesn’t actually know
what she’s going to be doing.

Charlotte snorts, “I’m going to frost the cupcakes and Gwen is going to decorate them with sugar
strands.” She smiles to the girl, “I had to use my best assistant for that.”

“Me?” The toddler’s eyes wide with hope.

“Of course it’s you.” Charlotte grins toward the toddler, starting to pipe the frosting onto the small
cakes. Noticing that the toddler is separating the colors of the strands before carefully placing them
on each small cake. It amuses Char a bit, knowing the toddler was taking her time. She lifts her head
to meet her mother’s eyes, “Do you want to decorate some as well?” She teases her a bit.

Bernie rolls her eyes, “I think Gwen has it all sealed up.” She lets her daughter pull her hand down,
squeezing a bit of frosting onto her finger for her to taste. She does the same for the toddler when
Gwen follows in her Gran’s lead. “This is fantastic.” She sucks on her finger.

“Whipped Philly icing.” Char waves her eyebrows a little, “Homemade, of course.” She finishes
piping each of the personal red velvet cakes. “Trying to brush up on my baking skills so that I can
make proper cakes when we need them. Celebrations and whatnot.”

“Quite the hobby.” Bernie smirks, “Don’t know where you get the ability from. I know Marcus nor I have it.”

“Some of us are surgeons, others can cook things without burning them.” Charlotte raises her eyebrows, “Speaking of Marcus though, I...kind of...invited him round for dinner tomorrow night. I know you and Serena both work late and...” The young woman swallows, a bit of anxiety flashing across her face, “He um...”

“You don’t need to, you know.” Bernie notices the slight change in her daughter, “If it’s too much, see if you can make it another day. Your father has off at least two days during the week. If you’d rather Serena or myself be here with you during dinner with your father, I have absolutely no problems with that. I’m sure Serena would say the same.”

Hearing her name, Serena tilts her head over, “What’s that?”

“Dinner with Char and Marcus.” Bernie states simply.

“Sounds fun.” She moves away from her conversation with Jason, to the other group. Serena leans down to Guinevere, placing a hand on the toddler’s back, “You are doing such a magnificent job, Gwen.”

“Tank.” Gwen continues to carefully put the colorful sugar strands, completely focused.

“I don’t want you...” Charlotte licks her lips, watching the toddler, but still speaking about her father’s visit for dinner, “I don’t want you to think that you have to do it. It’s just that Dad has seen Cole twice in almost six months...and I’m...” She shrugs, trying to keep her emotions at bay, “I don’t know if I’ve completely forgiven him from all the...” Char doesn’t feel like she can finish the sentence, hoping her mother and stepmother would understand that she was referring to her father’s lack of concern when she moved to live with Anders. She lifts her hand, tucking a stray hair behind her ear, the rest pulled back with a clip.

Serena wraps an arm around the young woman’s back, gently squeezing her with reassurance, “I would be honored...though I’m certain your mother would be as well.” She smirks a little, “The current and the ex...sounds like a sitcom waiting to happen.”
Charlotte smiles ever so slightly, seeing as Gwen completes her task, “All finished?” When the girl nods, she lifts her from the counter, spinning her slightly as she hugs her tenderly, “Best assistant I could ask for.” She turns, holding the toddler on her hip, “Would you two mind carrying them to the lounge? I think we’ve done enough.” She leads them back to the living room area, taking a seat next to her brother, letting the girl climb back over to him as she usually does when he’s present.

Jason sits on the floor, now holding Cole in his lap. “Charlotte, I’ve noticed that Cole is much larger than Guinevere was at this age. Is that normal?”

Shrugging, Char smiles a bit, “His father was a large baby...or so he says.”

“As was his mother.” Bernie takes a seat on the floor, though there’s plenty of seating, she found it to be more relaxing in their random family get togethers. The room chuckles a bit as the young woman gives her mother an amused look. “Just saying, Char, it isn’t just his eyes he gets from you.”

“Well, he certainly doesn’t yell at me as often as his mother does.” Cam replies, only to get an elbow to the ribs by his sister next to him, “Or hurt me.”

“That’s enough, you two.” Serena scowls toward the two Wolfe children, reaching to pick up a cupcake.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Annette helps Charlotte understand her own behavior.
Charlotte speaks of her disdain the house she owns.

Chapter Notes

Bonus chapter...just for the heck of it.

23 weeks.

Charlotte runs her hands over her face within the confines of Dr. Vickers office, relaxing on the sofa with her feet tucked up underneath of her. Her shoes on the floor as she wouldn’t dare place her dirty soles of said shoes onto the leather sofa. “I just feel like...I need to go.” She shrugs, “He doesn’t...hurt me anymore.”

“That’s the thing though, Charlotte. His mere presence hurts you. We’ve realized that during your hypnosis sessions.” Annette Vickers watches her patient closely. Something about her eastern American accent relaxing Charlotte, but she isn’t really certain why. “You’re afraid of him. All of him.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.” Her voice rather soft, unsure.

“On Boxing Day...only several months ago, you were attacked in your own home. A safe space that was invaded by this man who has given you more scars than happy memories.” Vickers pulls her legs up under herself, her own shoes being removed a while ago. Usually when she enters her office, unless a patient needs a little intimidation to speak about their thoughts and feelings. “You’ve spoken to me about those times.”

“I know.” Char nods slowly, “I just...feel like I owe him, I suppose.”

“For what?”
“Everything. He’s given Cole and I all of his savings, the house, his cars...everything.” Charlotte licks her lips, staring forward, but at nothing really, “and I haven’t even...been back to the house. Not since...” She shrugs, “Not since I’ve moved in with Serena.”

“Why haven’t you gone to the house to at least obtain some of your belongings?” Vickers tilts her head to the side.

“I don’t know.” She brings a hand to her head, running it through her hair, “I haven’t...had the courage to go back, I suppose.”

“The courage.” The doctor nods slowly, “That’s an interesting word to use.”

“Yeah...I can’t really think of a better one, currently.” Charlotte bites the skin on her lip, “my things are there. Photographs and...things I collected during my time with him.” She clears her throat, “It would be such a great house to raise Cole in. Spacious...yet cozy. Beautiful house, but...I just can’t bring myself to walk through the doors.” She chuckles a little to herself, “sounds so pathetic.”

“Oh, I don’t think it sounds pathetic in the least,” Vickers shrugs, “No, I think it’s incredibly brave of you to admit.”

“If I could set the place on fire, I would...I would in a heartbeat.”

“Yet, you go up to Darwin and sit with the same man you lived with during that time-”

Charlotte shakes her head negatively, “It isn’t the same man.” She pulls her knees up a bit, “Doesn’t really feel like the same man. He’s like...a child now. I share so much history with him in such a short amount of time. However, it’s a chunk of my life. I dated him for six months before I moved in with him. I was twenty at the time. He and I were just starting when Mum was flown in from Kabul after the IED.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, “She hated the idea...then things came out about...” She sighs softly, hating how she acted during that time of her life in regards to her relationship with her mother. “And I, suddenly, wanted to be a wife. I wanted to tend to my husband like...some vintage fifties housewife. Beholden to her husband as opposed to being an equal partner to him.”

“Because your mother wouldn’t.” It wasn’t a question, Vickers quickly understood the younger woman’s intentions, “You had to distance yourself from her decisions in life.”
“I guess...at the time. I was a child.” Char chortles softly to herself, bitterly, “Sounds ridiculous, but I don’t even recognize the person I used to be then. She was...so angry and...stupid. She just seems so much younger than I am now, but...it really wasn’t even that long ago.”

“No, not by actual measurements of time. However, you lived...or were kept from living for an entire year. You were shut off, just about, from the outside world. You were abused physically, mentally, and emotionally during that time.” Vickers adjusts her position within the confines of her high backed chair, “Want me to tell you why you’ve been going to sit with Anders during his time on Darwin?” When she notices the young woman glance over to her, she continues, “because it’s comfortable. There’s no dark motive in your behavior, though you originally wanted there to be, it’s just something you’re comfortable with. Now that he isn’t all there mentally or physically, he’s safe to you. You are telling your brain to file him in your safe people folder, but your brain also wants to file him in the stay away - fucking psychopath section as well.” It garners an honest laugh from the young woman, knowing she can use vulgar language with her without repercussions.

“That makes sense, but...how can I-”

“You can’t.” Vickers shakes her head slowly, “Until he finally leaves this plane of existence, your brain is never going to let you rest when it comes to all that.”

Charlotte inhales slowly, then exhales. “I want it to stop though.”

“I think going to the house would help you.” Vickers answers honestly, “Not alone though. I think you mother and Serena would be great companions for your journey. Possibly your brother.” She reaches to the coffee table, picking up her mug to take a sip of her tea within it. “I think your father would be an interesting choice. The way you speak of him, he’s not present in your life at the moment. Not really, at least.”

“He’s been...trying a bit more. Not to any fruitful results, he keeps rescheduling, but...” She shrugs a little, “You know, growing up, I was a Daddy’s Girl for the most part. Apple of his eye...and I knew it. I reveled in it. Got away with murder most of the time.” Char huffs a chortle to herself, “Cam still calls me Darling Charlotte . That’s just how my Dad was. My Mum thought the world of Cam, but I was always her favorite.” Charlotte pauses, collecting her thoughts for a moment before continuing, “She treated us the same, for the most part, but there were some things she was...more adamant with me about than she was with him. Like me getting a driver’s permit as early as I possibly could or...ensuring I went to school and stayed in school. Cam used to cut all the time. Like...all the time. I’m quite surprised he was able to graduate at all. I think she thought I was going to be the one who would be the surgeon. Not that I didn’t want to do that, but I think it’s a bit late for me to go down that path.”

“Nothing is ever too late if you really want to do it, but I don’t think you do.” Vickers smiles a little,
“you’re more the nurturing type. To be a surgeon, there needs to be a sense of...coldness. Not that only frigid people can do that sort of work, but one needs to be able to cut off their emotions at the drop of a hat and I...don’t know if you’re capable of that. No offense.”

“None taken, I don’t think I am either.” Char’s face softens, “I’ve thought about writing a book lately, though I doubt anyone would read it.” When she notices the doctor want her to elaborate, “Autobiographical non-fiction.” Char bites her lip a little, “My thought is that even if one young woman, in a similar situation that I was, reads my book and is able to take something away from it, it would all be worth it.” She shrugs a little, “I don’t know how I feel about it just yet.”

“Doesn’t hurt to start.” The doctor nods, “In fact, I think writing things down may help you all around. Keeping something as simple as a diary or blog may even help.”

“I’m...kind of a private person though.” Char chuckles at herself again, “Because writing an autobiography screams that.”

“I think it’s more about getting one’s thoughts in order, but I think it’s a great idea nonetheless.” Vickers nods, glancing over when her timer goes off finally, “Seems our session is up for the day. I do think it was quite enlightening, don’t you?”

Charlotte nods, lowering her feet from the sofa to pull on her shoes, “I’m double thinking the whole...dinner with Dad thing though. He’s already rescheduled twice.”

“Only do what makes you comfortable right now. Don’t push yourself too much. Baby steps.” Vickers stands from her position in her high backed chair, walking around to her desk behind it. “Don’t do something because you think you should, do it because you want to. You can forgive people and still keep them at a distance. Maybe join him out to dinner. Have dinner in a neutral territory. It wouldn’t be you in his space or him in your space. It would be no one’s space and you can’t be blamed for bad food.”

“I’d never be blamed for bad food.” Char smirks as she stands, lazily saluting the woman as she makes her exit through the doorway.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

With Serena in tow, Charlotte visits the house she was tortured in, with negative results. Serena realizes how dire the situation used to be for Charlotte.

Chapter Notes

I will put up a bit of a content warning for this chapter. It does depict a couple forms of abuse as well as psychological trauma. However, it isn't anything that hasn't already been seen on the show.

Cole is now 25 weeks old (bit over 6 months).

Charlotte leans back from her place behind the steering wheel of her mother’s car, Serena sitting next to her in the passenger seat, and Cole within the confines of his infant car seat behind them. She lifts her eyes to look at the large house in front of her. Her hands tremble, but she doesn’t realize it until Serena reaches over to take hold of the hand closest to her. Clearing her throat, “I don’t know what I was thinking.” Her voice small, “Vickers said to...said this would be a good idea, but...”
“We can go back home if you wish, Charlotte.” Serena answers honestly. She knows it’s going to cause her a bit of pain as well, “Nothing says you need to do this right now...or ever.”

“I do though.” Quickly glancing up to the rear view mirror to see her son’s sleeping face from the back seat. Another mirror set up so she wouldn’t have to completely turn around to check on him while driving. Char swallows, *he isn’t here*, she tells herself. However, she isn’t really sure that even works, “and who knows, maybe I might even change my mind about this place. Maybe I’ll want to move back here...and leave.”

“Maybe.” That’s probably the last thing Serena wants to happen, but she knows the young woman is probably only saying something that would get a reaction from her. Make her want to talk Char out of it. “Or maybe it will only serve as a reminder that you made the correct decision over a year ago.” Gently squeezing the young woman’s hand, “We may go in there and see that his life went to absolute rubbish in your absence.”

Charlotte clears her throat a little as she nods slowly. She reaches into her jacket pocket, pulling out the house keys he had given her. “You know, I never had keys to this house until Andy gave them to me just at Christmastime.” She huffs a soft chortle to herself, “for some reason, I never thought it was bizarre at the time. He usually just made sure he was home before I was...until I wasn’t allowed to leave anymore.” Char bites her lip a little, still not taking her eyes off the house. She slowly takes a deep breath, then exhales just as slowly, opening her car door afterwards.

“Shall I put Cole in his pushchair or is his car seat enough?” Serena climbs out at the same time, watching the young woman.

“Whatever you want.” Her voice is soft as she begins walking away from them, knowing she needs to enter the house on her own. Char makes her way of the path toward the house, her hands still trembling as she places the key in the lock, turning it quickly.

“I own you.” Anders’ hand wrapped around her throat, her cheek bruised, her lip split. “All of these things here...they are mine. This house, its furnishings, those cars, all mine. You are no different.” Leaning his face in, he captured her lips passionately before pushing her angrily back against the wall.

Her back leaning against the wall as she stands just beyond the foyer, Char closes her eyes, feeling as they fill with tears. She had a feeling this would happen. Reliving the things that happened here. Reaching into her pocket, she pulls her sunglasses over her face. Better to hide than face Serena’s worry. Lifting her hand to touch a definite fist print that was outlined in the wall by the crumbling paint and plasterboard behind it.
Charlotte stepped aside, staring at him as he cradles his hand, bloody and already swelling. His face was red with anger, sweat beading at his brow. “Did you break it?” A part of her felt bad, but then another was proud of her own accomplishment.

“Did you honestly think that would stop me?” Lifting his fist again, this time grabbing the collar of her shirt so he wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

Serena places a hand on the young woman’s shoulder, feeling her jump at the touch. “I don’t think this is the right decision right now, Charlotte.” She was watching as the young woman was zoning out before touching her, her voice soft.

“It’s fine, I’m fine.” Char responds quickly, not glancing back toward the other woman, but hearing her son’s soft snoring from his car seat. She’s shaking more, but decides to continue on, shrugging away from her stepmother. Charlotte continues through the grand house, making her way to the kitchen. It appears cold, yet updated. “He...” She huffs a soft chuckle to herself, “this is all I wanted.”

Serena stays close behind her, leaving Cole to continue sleeping in his carseat in the foyer. “Has it changed?”

“He asked me once what...what I would change about each room. We would go room to room...few months after I moved in and things came out with Mum, I was a bit melancholy. This was...the only room I really...wanted a larger change in.” Charlotte keeps her arms at her side, “and he did it...after I left. This is all redone. Even a proper mixer.” She motions over toward the baby blue stand mixer that matches the cabinets. “He would go for such long stretches where he was just...the sweetest man in the world. I never asked for much, but whatever I needed, he would rush to fulfill.” Charlotte tilts her head to the side, “Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde...”

“I’ll add it to the list.” Anders kept his arms wrapped around her waist from behind affectionately, softly kissing her shoulder, “this room is rather basic currently. I don’t use it much on my own.”

Charlotte smiled genuinely, her hands were over his. “Why are you doing all of this? This is your house...I only just moved in.”

“Because I plan to make you my wife someday and I want you to be comfortable in the space where we’ll live the rest of our lives.” Anders cooed in her ear, capturing her lips tenderly when she turned around, picking her up into his arms like some old romance movie as he carried her toward the stairs.
“Too bad there isn’t anything worthwhile.” Char tugs the refrigerator door open, not really surprised to find it completely empty. “Unless I made it, it was take away. Didn’t happen often though.”

“You’re an amazing cook, Charlotte.” Serena was nervous to come along before, but she’s actually really glad she did now. Maybe she needed this too. Help knowing she wasn’t alone. She catches sight of a picture on the wall, one of Marcus and Bernie with a toddler Cameron and newborn Charlotte in her arms. “Blimey, you were a beautiful family.”

“Still are.” Charlotte smirks slightly, “Mum has hardly changed.”

“I always knew that you were the spitting image, but never realized just how much.”

“I love that picture.” Char folds her arms across her chest, “That one of us all at Christmas is around here as well.” She moves to the lounge, seeing the various pictures on the mantle of the fireplace. “Here...also one with you and Mum.”

“You didn’t remember me when you were brought into AAU after your accident.” Serena raises an eyebrow, “How could you have forgotten me if I’m all over the house?” The thought amuses her a bit, “I jest.”

“One of my favorites.” Charlotte motions to separate photographs. Serena flanked by Cameron and Charlotte, and one of Bernie flanked by Jason and Elinor. “One thing Anders never touched were the photographs. I could have...placed them on every surface of this place and he’d have said nothing.” She smirks a little. The room is warm, cozy, yet modern at the same time. The sofa and loveseat a dark shade of teal with sand colored accents.

It causes Serena to pause a bit, focusing on the two photographs, “I’ve never seen these before.”

Glancing over to the woman, then what she was focusing on, “Yeah...Elinor...” Char shrugs a little, “I asked her for copies the same day and she emailed them a day later. I thought you were included in that. I’m sorry. I’ll get you what she sent me.” Biting her lip a little, she continues, “Just take those for now, though.”

“I’d appreciate that. Thank you.” Serena swallows, carefully lifting them from the mantel and holding them in her arm. Hearing the babe begin to fuss from the foyer, she nods a little, “I’ll get him.”
“Thanks.” Charlotte ignores the woman leaving the room as she lifts a portrait from the wall, then seeing the trail of dried blood underneath of it. Her own dried blood. She licks her lips, remembering the wallop to the jaw that landed it there. There’s far too many memories here for her liking, the vast majority negative.

“Charlotte?”

Still focusing on the blood splatter, Char calls out, “Coming.” Anything to be out of this room.
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

Serena discovers something unusual about Charlotte.

Arriving to help transport things, Bernie understands just how bad things were for her daughter.

Serena clutches onto Cole as she continues on through the house, taking time to sit on top of the duvet within the confines of the master bedroom. She watches as Charlotte shoves various pieces of clothing into a large storage container, seeming a bit off. “I didn’t know you liked dresses so much.”

“I don’t.” Charlotte still packs them. The storage container isn’t large in the least, but she’s able to make the most of it. “It all goes back to my desire of portraying a proper housewife. That’s why they’re made that way. Straight out of the fifties. I looked fantastic in them, if I do say so myself, but I’m not one for dresses. No.”

When the young woman holds it up to her own form, Serena raises an eyebrow, “You and your mother have amazing figures. It is no doubt that you’d look amazing in that.”

“None of this probably fits me anymore.” Char smirks to herself, knowing her stepmother would be rolling her eyes. Her body hasn’t changed much from her pre-baby shape. Just a slightly larger bosom and a few stretch marks across her tummy. She had done a fantastic job of keeping active during her pregnancy and since her son’s birth, such as walking or jogging each day to get Cole down for his nap when she’s able to, weather permitting.

“Oh save it. If you’re so uncertain, why not try it on?” Serena sits the boy in her lap, glancing down to him as he seems amazed with the new surroundings. “If it doesn’t fit, we can just leave it.”

“Feels like he’s going to be hungry soon anyhow.” She effortlessly removes her cotton t-shirt and tight-fitting denim trousers, standing only in her undergarments. No shame befalls her as she does this, much to Serena’s astonishment. Char pulls on the button down old-fashioned dress, that falls just past her knees. Lightweight fabric and, to her surprise, comfortable. “See?”

“Well,” Serena raises an eyebrow, “you look positively fetching.”
“Looks better with pumps...which is what I usually wore.” Char pauses, “Maybe that’s why I didn’t like wearing the dresses.” She sighs, “I’d...” Char glances down to herself, sliding her hands in the pockets in front of the dress. “I was absolutely...brainwashed.”

Nodding a little, Serena adjusts the babe in her arms when he starts to whimper, “You’ve grown, Charlotte...and you’ve realized that you deserve better in life.”

“Well, it isn’t just me that I need to worry about anymore.” Charlotte unbuttons the top few buttons of her dress with one hand, exposing herself to feed her son as she takes the boy in her arm with her free hand, “So I think that helps.”

“Hello?” Bernie calls from the foyer, having gotten a text message from her partner that they were still at the house as she was leaving work. She glances about, noticing the few holes in the walls and knowing her daughter was on the receiving end of them.

Serena gives the young woman a nod, rising from the bed to meet her partner on the floor below. She lets her relaxed facade crack ever so slightly as she embraces Bernie tightly, taking in her smell as she stands there. She feels her partner hold onto her in return. “This place is awful.” She whispers, closing her eyes as they stand there.

“I know.” Bernie nods a little, keeping her arms around Serena’s waist. “I see it all.” It makes Bernie’s stomach drop, the dried blood being especially bothersome to her. At least she isn’t here anymore, she tells herself. Not even wanting any of them to be there without Anders Hero to be there at that point. “Where is she?”

“Feeding Cole upstairs. Packing a few things otherwise.” Serena’s face softens as she picks her head up from Bernie’s shoulder, keeping her voice just above a whisper, “I don’t believe this was the best idea. She’s...Charlotte will begin to focus on certain things and it’s like she...loses herself in the memory.” The whole experience over the past few hours has taken quite the toll on Serena, she has tears in her eyes, but turns away from her partner while taking hold of her hand.

Bernie pauses when she sees an old picture from Charlotte’s first week home, “Oh look at this one.” She smirks at the appearance of her small children, but sees the lost look about her own face from then. If only she could speak to that woman, tell her everything will be okay if she’s just true to herself. Taking a moment to glance over toward her partner, everything would have been vastly different. “Let’s take most of these with us.” She lifts the picture from the wall, only to be met with dried blood splatter underneath.

Serena can tell it’s triggered Bernie a bit, “How about I pick these up and you check in with
Charlotte?” They’ve been standing here for a bit, just holding onto one another.

“I’m fine...Cole just needed his pacifier, and I’ll try to feed him again when we get home.” Charlotte stands just behind them, Cole on her hip, still clad in her vintage appearing dress. Her mother’s soft and slightly worried appearing face is something she’s seen far too many times in her life, especially recently. She licks her lips to quickly cure their dryness, but attempts to maintain a composed appearance, “Lots of things happened here. Some good, some not so good. I know it’s hard for the two of you to...to see some of it. It’s hard for me too. However, I’m here.” She pauses, her eyes glassy, “And I’m fine.”

“Of course you are. You’re a Wolfe.” Bernie allows the corner of her mouth to turn up in a smirk, “However, as a mother-” She takes a moment, “As your mother, I’m allowed to...dwell on the things that happened to you here. You’d do the same if someone ever hurt Cole.”

“If someone hurt Cole, they’d be dead.” Char’s tone simple, matter-of-fact. She takes her time inhaling slowly and exhaling, “It’s actually good you came. The both of you have very small cars. I could trouble you to take a crate in your boot.”

“Oh, absolutely.” The older blonde offers a nod.

“And I think I may just go and buy my own car...today, maybe.” Charlotte glances down at her son who is now reaching for his grandmothers when he sees them again. “Nothing terribly crazy, but four doors would help.”

“You haven’t even a driving license!” Bernie shakes her head a little, knowing her daughter commonly becomes erratic when she isn’t comfortable in a situation, “You also, technically, own three vehicles already.”

“Let’s work on it and we can even go with you. License first, then we can go and buy whatever car you believe to be the best fit for you. Allow you time to research.” Serena offers, knowing a more calm approach would probably work best in this instance. “Even give you time to choose a color.”

Char swallows, glancing between the women before nodding. “I need to get the hell out of here.” Her eyes pool with tears, though she refuses to acknowledge them, her voice just above a whisper.

“We’ll take Cole back upstairs with us. He can stay on the bed as we pack a few more things. Serena can gather some more photographs down here and we’ll meet at this very spot when we finish.”
Bernie offers, “This is your house, Char. We can take our time with it. No reason everything needs to be completed in one day.”

“You’re right.” Char nods absently, letting her mother take Cole from her arms as she’s led to the stairs again.

Serena can tell this isn’t the last they’re going to hear about any of this. She knows this is something both she and Charlotte are going to go back to. The blood on the walls doesn’t help. Neither does her imagination on what could have been done to her stepdaughter for them to land there.
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

During a lack of confidence, Bernie reveals her guilt to her partner.

After falling ill, Cole's grandmothers diagnose him.

Chapter Notes

Same day as the last two.

Bernie carefully closes the door leading to her daughter’s bedroom in the safety of their own house, catching the eyes of her partner staring at her from the other side of the hall. “I know what you’re going to say.” When the other woman doesn’t reply, she continues, “The sedative was necessary.” Still nothing, “She needed to sleep.”

“Agreed. However-”

“No. No, however.” Bernie shakes her head a little, moving her right hand a bit as she speaks and sidestepping to lean against the wall, “Earlier, at the house, when she...if we weren’t there, Serena, she would have gone out to buy a car right there and then. Completely on a whim. Always on a whim. Like she doesn’t know how to control herself at times.”

Serena continues to stare at her partner, “However, Berenice,” When her partner slowly glances over toward her, she continues, “I seem to remember someone who went all the way to Kiev on a whim. Someone who decided to help open a Trauma Center in Nairobi on a whim.” A knowing smirk begins to grow across her lips, “She takes after you.”

“How isn’t it?” Serena slowly folds her arms across her midsection. “What we saw today is that the multiple forms of trauma she experienced at the hands of Anders Hero is far more than what we previously imagined. I keep wondering if the pictures were wiped off after a beating or hung there after the fact to hide the stains?” The whole ordeal has obviously affected her as well, her eyes glassy, “I’ve sent an e-mail to Annette Vickers with some photographs I captured on my mobile just to give her a better idea of what we encountered today.”
Bernie looks straight forward in an attempt to both calm herself and collect her thoughts, “I thought she was just angry with me. I...I had no idea. I would have...broken down the door. Given him a taste of his own medicine.” Her eyes are glassy as well, her voice goes quiet for a moment before she continues, “When I was in Kabul...there was so much I saw. Women stoned within an inch of their life from male oppressors, stabbings because a woman spoke to a man without her husband or father present, child-brides ripped from stem to stern on their wedding night.” She’s never spoken about these things with Serena before, but she knows Serena has been there for some of her memory induced nightmares. “That isn’t even mentioning our own people that we needed to treat.” Another pause, “then we moved to Nairobi and while I was saving everyone else, my own daughter was having the walls of her home painted with her own blood.”

“You couldn’t have known, Bernie.” Serena doesn’t move, just watching her partner closely. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“That doesn’t make it feel any better.” Bernie glances down toward the floor, her eyes beginning to brim with tears, “I could have put my foot down more-”

“And she would have fought you even harder to be with him.” Serena shakes her head slowly, “A Romeo and Juliet complex, I’d reckon. The more you’d say you didn’t like him, the more she’d want to be with him. The more she would do everything in her power to do so. Therefore, If you did what you said you would have, things could have been far worse.”

Bernie slowly lowers herself to the floor by leaning against the wall, finally letting a tear escape the confines of her eye. She pulls her knees up, her chin trembling slightly, “I don’t know what to do now.”

Finally, Serena moves closer to her, lowering herself to the floor next to her fiance and looping her arm around that of her partner. “We just do what we’ve always done. We remain solid for her...and now for Cole.” She pauses, swallowing, “We do what mothers do, darling.”

Lacing her fingers between that of her girlfriend, Bernie nods a little. She knows how much it has probably taken for Serena to go through all of this today. She leans over slowly, capturing the other woman’s lips with her own, only breaking apart after a couple moments, “You’re right.” She says, her voice haughty and low. Bernie’s eyes stay closed as her face remains close to Serena’s.

Serena lifts a hand to tuck a piece of Bernie’s hair behind her ear, finally pulling her closer and pressing a kiss against the woman’s forehead after. “Everything will be just fine.” Holding her a moment, she hears Cole beginning to fuss from the direction of their bedroom. “I reckon if he sleeps with us, you’ll be a bit more...comfortable.”
Bernie raises an amused eyebrow, knowing it was at the comfort of her partner, “Sure, but I’m famished. Should we order take-away?”

“At eleven at night?”

“No time like the present. I believe there’s still Chinese available until one. At least, that’s what Cameron has told me in the past.” Bernie explains, motioning with a wave of her hand toward their bedroom, “You get the boy.” She pushes herself up from the floor, walking toward the stairs.

Serena sighs a little, not expecting her partner to be affected in such a way. After hearing Cole continue to whimper, she stands herself, moving to her bedroom and lifting the boy up from the bed into her arms. “Hello there, handsome. What seems to be the matter?” When he pathetically lays his head on her shoulder, still whimpering, she furrows her brow. Pressing her own cheek against the boy’s head for a moment, she feels his temperature. “You’re burning up.” She starts to walk toward the stairs, absently rubbing the infant’s back as she descends.

Seeing the look on her partner’s face once she enters the kitchen area, Bernie begins to stare, “What’s the matter?”

“He’s feverish.” She offers him to the other woman, “Fairly high one, I reckon. I’m going to retrieve the thermometer so we can get a better read on the situation.” Serena sighs as she leaves the confines of the kitchen, calling back, “Hopefully it’s just teething.”

“Hopefully.” Bernie begins to remove the babe’s clothing in an attempt to cool him down, “Okay, Cole. We’re going to get you sorted.” Cole spits up all on the front of her blouse and she begins to nod slowly. “Lovely, thank you.” At least it isn’t over the buttons, she thinks as her nimble fingers begin to remove her own shirt, leaving her in only her nude lace brassiere covering her upper body.

Serena returns, furrowing her own brow when she meets the doorway, “What on earth are you doing?”

“Baby spittle.” Bernie knows this probably looks ridiculous, holding the boy to her chest again, “Probably everything from that last feed, unfortunately.”

“Poor thing-“
“-it was a new shirt.”

“The baby.” Serena scowls, amusingly. She walks closer, retrieving the thermometer from the pack. “Rectally or Axillary?”

“Well, if he’s vomiting, I think it would be a terrible idea for it to come out of the other end...while you’re taking his temperature.” Bernie softly pats the baby’s diaper when she hears him continually moan softly against her. “Wouldn’t happen to have an otoscope in there, would you?”

“You think it’s an ear infection?”

“I know as much as you do.”

Serena nods, “I’ll call his pediatrician in the morning, but hopefully we can take care of things in the meantime.” She places a plastic covering over the electric thermometer before sliding it under Cole’s arm and holding it down to get an accurate reading. Her other hand goes to his head, gently running her nails through his light brunette hair. “Almost finished.”

“He could use some Dioralyte. Milk never smells good coming back up.” Bernie watches her partner as she removes the thermometer as it begins to beep, “Well?”

A look of worry begins to spread on Serena’s face, “We need to get him cooled down. He’s up to thirty-nine point two.”

“At six months, that’s dangerously high.” Bernie sighs softly, leaning her head down to place a gentle kiss on the top of his head, “I’ll get in the bath with him. Even a warm bath should cool him down-”

“He’s shivering.” Serena points out, keeping her hand on his back. Looking up to her partner, their eyes meet.

“Flu .” They say in unison.
“Which means it’s going to spread through this house like wildfire.” Bernie shakes her head a little, “probably picked it up on one of their trips to hospital to visit us.” She sighs softly, offering the baby back to Serena once she closes the first aid pack back up. “Let me get changed and I’ll go and get him Dioralyte.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Serena cuddles the still whimpering baby to her chest, “I’ll run him a bath to cool him down a bit.”

“Could start with a nappy change.” Bernie gives her a sly smirk, grabbing her discarded curdled breast milk covered blouse from the counter top as she steps briskly to the doorway, then stairs.

“Your Gran. What shall we do with her, Cole?” Serena sighs, continuing to straighten up the space. “And she says your Mum is the erratic one. Well, give her a chance and she’ll run you mad.” She mumbles, glancing down again to notice he’s fallen asleep against her, “I know you’re so tired, but I really need to cool you down. How about a nappy change and you can lie about in just said nappy?” She doesn’t expect him to answer, but it helps her to speak things allowed to formulate plans, “Lovely.”
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Waking after being sedated, Charlotte realizes she's missed out on her motherly duties.

Cole's illness may be worse than originally thought.

Chapter Notes

This is kind of the start of a small new story arc. It will get a bit dark, but I do hope you guys like it.

There will be a new character introduced during said arc that will be returning later on.

Charlotte opens an eye ever so slightly, snapping it closed when the sunlight beams through the windows. “Bloody hell.” She whispers to herself, feeling as if she has a hangover. She pauses, remembering that she didn’t drink the night prior. Slowly pushing herself up to a sitting position, she shuffles toward her son’s nursery, noticing his cot empty when she cracks the door open. Char’s stomach drops, “come on.” She whispers, knowing that if she begins to call his name, she’ll look like a madwoman. Maybe you never had a baby, she begins to think. Like that Ingrid Bergman movie, The Murder in Thornton Square. It’s a stretch, but it makes her think for a moment.

Noticing her parents’ bedroom door cracked ajar, she scrunches her face, hoping she doesn’t walk into something she definitely doesn’t want to see her parents doing. Char pushes the door open slowly, silently. Cole asleep in only a nappy, resting on Bernie’s cotton short-sleeved shirted upper torso. The blonde’s hand comfortably placed on his bottom. Serena’s arm wrapped lazily around her partner, as if they all fell asleep looking at one another. It happens occasionally, where Cole will be in bed with her parents as they let her sleep. They spoil her that way.

Carefully returning the door to a crack, Char smiles to herself, turning from the sight. She heads toward the stairs, starving. After tugging the refrigerator open and retrieving the eggs. She notices the clock on the back of the stove, just after ten in the morning. The young woman furrows her brow, finding it unusual that anyone in the house would sleep so late and hardly even understands how she did so herself. She decides to make breakfast anyway.

Serena begins to stir when she realizes just how bright it is outside, far later than she’s used to waking. Lifting a hand to touch Cole’s head, she sighs at his flushed appearance. Still feverish, she says internally. However, she’s glad they were all able to get to sleep after their eventful night filled with vomit covered shirts and wet nappies galore.
Bernie glances over tiredly when she feels her partner moving, licking her lips while still keeping her eyes closed. “Time is it?” She whispers, watching as her partner reaches over for her wristwatch on her bedside table.

“After ten...and from the smell of it, Charlotte is making breakfast.” Serena keeps her head comfortably against Bernie’s upper arm, “suppose she feels better than she did yesterday.”

“Cooking seems to relax her. So...I’m happy to reap the benefits of that.” Bernie opens one of her eyes a little to see her partner’s face, offering her a tired smile. “He didn’t fall asleep really until nearly four.”

“His fever still hasn’t broken. I’ll take it again in a moment, but hopefully it’s lowered just a bit.” Serena nods, closing her eyes a little again, “I still want to get him in for a peds appointment today...or at least try to. I’d hate it if we were wrong and it’s something worse.”

“I think we’re right on the money and I’d hate to take him into that environment for nothing if we don’t need to. I phoned Henrik to let him know we’d be staying home today...praying that Cole’s strain of flu is one we’ve been vaccinated for.” Bernie smirks a little, “I don’t want to move, but I know I need to get him up so I can get him something to drink. Keep him hydrated.”

“Well, if he continues to be unable to retain said fluids, I’ll definitely want to get him to Otter for a saline and vitamin drip.” Serena offers, running her fingers over his soft self-made mohawk, “This fever worries me quite a bit though.”

“Agreed.” Bernie tilts her head to the side to look at the babe’s sleeping face. Watching as her partner continues to rub his back to wake him, “Cole.” Her voice low and she smirks a bit as the babe starts to rub his face against her. “That-a-boy. Wakey wakey.”

“He’s so in love with you two.” Charlotte watches them from the doorway again, smirking a little with her arms folded. “We’ve all slept in. I do hope no one needs to be off to work.”

“We’re fine.” Serena rolls over, pushing herself up to sitting, “We were up most of the night. Cole has the flu.”

“The flu?” Char furrows her brow, stepping closer and lowering her arms to her sides, “Why didn’t you wake me?”
“That would have been difficult.” Bernie starts, glancing over, “You were sedated.” When her daughter continues to stare at her, “You were exhausted both emotionally and physically and I just gave you something to make your mind stop racing. He didn’t start getting sick until after...I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.” Her tone honest, sincere.

“I don’t like that.” Charlotte replies softly.

“I had your permission. I don’t know if you fully understood what you were agreeing to at the time, but you still gave me allowance.” Bernie watches her, then glances back to the boy on her chest, “He’s still running a fever and having difficulty retaining fluids. We’ll try another bottle of Dioralyte to see how he holds that down. Give it a couple hours. If it isn’t better, I suggest we take him to hospital for an IV.”

Char has tears in her eyes, “I should have been the one to tend to him.”

“It doesn’t matter who takes care of him as long as he was taken care of. You’re allowed to rest.” Serena glances over toward the younger woman standing next to the bed. “You’re awake now though. I know he probably wants his Mum.”

She isn’t so certain of that. He always favors his grandmothers. Charlotte gently takes him off of Bernie’s chest, holding him in her arms, feeling as he pulls closer to her when he smells her familiar scent. It causes her to smirk a little to herself, warmed by the boy’s behavior. “You kept Gran and Nan up all night, did you?” She rubs his back gently as she stands again, walking toward the door. Char glances back, “Breakfast is ready downstairs. I’ll get his Dioralyte.”

“Deal.” Bernie waits for Char to walk away from the door to take her partner’s hand, pulling her close again, “Let’s just stay here for the rest of the day.”

Serena hums, leaning up to kiss her partner tenderly. “You were phenomenal last night.”

“Not for the ways I want to be given that compliment.” Bernie waves her eyebrows a little, a tired expression still covering her face, “I just feel bad for the lad. So small and in such pain. His little moans just broke my heart.” She sighs, “I just want that fever to break. It’s still so high.”

“I know.” Pausing, Serena sits up again, “Were his hands and feet cold?”
Bernie thinks for a moment, “I don’t remember.”

Rising off the bed, “Come on. Breakfast.” Serena tilts her head to the side, sweeping from the room with a mission on assessing her grandson. She walks into the kitchen, seeing her stepdaughter just holding the babe tightly, staring out and appearing lost. “Charlotte.”

Taking herself out of her staring, she lifts her gaze toward her stepmother, “His first time being sick...and I didn’t take care of him.” Char answers softly, disappointed in herself. “I appreciate all you and Mum did for him last night. I can only imagine that it wasn’t pretty, but I wanted to be the one to do it. I’m his mother.”

Serena was expecting that, actually. “I know. We both know.” She nears the young woman, knowing she needs to assess the babe again. “However, you were in no state to do so last night. So, two doctors tended to him...who just so happen to be your Mum and I.”

Running a hand through her hair, Char nods a little, her eyes glassy with tears. “You’re right.”

“I know.” Serena winks toward her, moving close enough to place a hand on the side of the young woman’s face. Her other hand feels the babe’s feet, cold. Her fingers travel to his hands, ice. Soft red rash starting to form up his back. “How about we get him prepared and take him to Otter ward? Just to be safe anyway.” Seeing the young woman nod again, she maintains her own composure, starting to fear that this is far worse than she and Bernie originally hypothesized.

“You’ll come with me?” Charlotte’s tone soft, filled with worry.

“I don’t believe we’d have it any other way.” Serena moves her hand to the young woman’s shoulder, offering it a reassuring squeeze. Remain strong.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

Being the only one without medical schooling, Charlotte feels like the odd one out.

When a handsome young doctor takes over Cole's care, Serena has doubts about his experience.

Chapter Notes

Cole is still 25 weeks.

Ryan Anand is played by Rahul Kohli. He's been on Holby before and we love to reuse actors, so why not?

Charlotte slowly rocks Cole in one of the rocking chairs within the Otter ward room. The boy still burning up, but she had just changed his nappy not long ago. So at least that was fresh. She could do that much. Noticing Serena not daring to go terribly far from them, “What is it you aren’t telling me?”

“What makes you think I'm withholding something from you?” Serena sits in one of the vinyl covered, high backed chairs. They were a calming mint green. Not calming to everyone, not to her. She’s sat in these plenty of times, none of those times she would consider calm.
“You’re hovering.” She gently strokes the boy’s soft hair, running her nails through it. Relaxing not only her son, but herself as well. “And I heard them speaking about a CT scan...possibly a lumbar puncture. For what? They don’t give those out willy-nilly and they certainly don’t refer them for the flu.” Charlotte isn’t angry, her voice not even raising.

Exhaling slowly, Serena glances toward the windows of the secluded room. Being in power around this hospital makes staff give you some allowances. “The symptoms for the flu and...meningitis can be quite similar-”

“Meningitis?” Charlotte shakes her head, a look of heartache spreading across her face, “that’s what they’re worried about? Meningitis is so, so risky. Dangerous.”

“Which is why we’re here. The rash didn’t start until you came to retrieve him this morning, or didn’t present itself to us until then.” Serena looks back over toward the young mother. “This is the best place for him right now.”

Char’s more disappointed than anything and it shows on her face and in her voice. “He won’t even feed anymore.” An IV line threaded into the back of his hand, wrapped with a small board and a bunch of gauze to keep him from pulling it out accidentally, “and I’m...I can’t do anything to help him except hold him. Except make him know that he’s safe...even if I’m not so sure about that myself.”

Serena feels her eyes starting to heat with unshed tears, “The plight of motherhood.”

“If they do a puncture, will that hurt him?” Charlotte’s voice quiet, needing her son as much as he needs her.

“They’ll numb the area, but it may hurt just a little for him.” Serena nods slightly, swallowing her emotions down, “I do believe, however, that it would be the best decision to just do that before the CT scan. If they find the CT scan abnormal, they’re going to want to do a lumbar puncture anyway. So why not cut out the middleman and do it first?”

Bernie returns to the room, various disposable cups in her arm, “Serena, coffee black. Char, breakfast tea with vanilla.” She hands them to the people in question before sitting on the edge of the foot of the normal sized bed, “How is our little soldier doing?” When Charlotte’s eyes drift over toward Serena, Bernie’s does as well.
“They want to do a lumbar puncture.”

“Meningitis?” Bernie pauses, looking back to her grandson, “Flu-like symptoms, sudden fever, listlessness, spreading rash...I concur.” She sighs softly, “I bet those soft moans were a headache and we just...didn’t understand.” Bernie rubs a hand over her own face as she lowers herself to a seat, “Poor boy.”

Knocking at the door frame, a handsome young man stands there. “How is our patient?”

Charlotte had gotten him settled for the most part. Been the one to speak with doctors mostly. “He’s tired.” Her face spent, filled with worry. She’s tired too.

Walking in a bit more, the young man sees the other two older women sitting there, “Ah, you must be Ms. Wolfe and Ms. Campbell.” He takes his time shaking their hands, “I’m Ryan Anand. I’ve been assigned to Cole’s case.” The reputation of these two women was legendary throughout the hospital, but he doesn’t seem the least bit intimidated.

“Charlotte was mentioning your desire to do a CT or lumbar puncture.” Serena calmly takes a sip of her coffee, staring down the young man. She's Medical Director around the entire hospital, his treatment of her grandson could make or break his career and still, he seems so relaxed, “Why not just a lumbar puncture?”

“I was just coming to ask her what she decided on that, ma’am.” Ryan replies, nodding to the Medical Director before returning his gaze on the young woman in the chair, “There are, of course, a fair share of risks involved on a lumbar puncture on someone as young as Cole, but that’s why I’ve given you the choice. We shouldn’t wait much longer on this. Puncture first, then CT. We need to see if he’s having any swelling.”

Charlotte rocks slowly, gently dragging her nails up and down her son’s back. She nods a little, “just help him.”

“Of course. I’ll speak with my nurses.” Ryan gently touches the young woman’s shoulder, “this isn’t the first time we’ve dealt with this particular ailment on Otter and it certainly won’t be the least. He’s in safe hands.” Offering the grandparents a cordial nod, he takes his leave.

“He seems nice.” Bernie glances between her daughter and her partner, “Young.”
“Too young.” Serena mumbles.

“He isn’t too young.” Charlotte looks over toward her, “Maybe Cam’s age. Older than me.”

“You’re too young as well.” Finally standing, Serena walks over to stand near the window. She knows Bernie’s probably rolling her eyes at the moment, “I’ve been in this business an incredibly long time. Too long. I know youth and inexperience when I see it.”

“Nothing has shown you that Dr. Anand is inexperienced.” Bernie argues, but her voice is still calm, knowing how her fiance is with new people, especially doctors that she has seniority over. “Give him a chance, fraulein.”

Charlotte smirks just a little, “fraulein.” She murmurs, finding the term amusing and fitting at the same time for the consultant’s behavior. “If anything, I reckon he may do better than those that have years under their belt. They listen to new ideas and investigate them instead of just...going with their gut and years of experience.”

“You remember Cam with that woman who was blind? She came in on a horse. Few years ago. Remember, Serena?” Bernie knows her partner won’t respond, instead she continues, glancing back toward her daughter, “Threw me for a loop. I thought I knew best, but he had seen odd behavior from the patient that I didn’t notice and went right over my head with it...to that one.” She motions with a quick bob of the head toward her partner. “So, years of experience doesn’t always constitute knowing everything that needs to be known.”

“However, I do want the best on this. I want Cole to have the best care. Their best doctor on this.” Serena glances over toward her partner again, knowing the woman is attempting to make a point, but understanding her as well. “I’m certain this doctor is lovely, but I don’t know anything of him.”

“So go and be a detective.” Bernie offers, looking toward her, “You’re the Medical Director of this hospital. You have the ability to pull his file and patient history. Go ahead, Lacey. Get a move on if you’re so worried.”

“And that makes you Cagney then?” Moving closer to her partner, Serena sighs, resigning from her stubbornness a bit, “You are a Cagney.”

“Exactly.”
Charlotte watches the both of them with intense confusion, though it isn’t particularly bothering her, “What the hell are the two of you on about?”

“Too young.” Bernie nods a little, smirking toward Serena.

Ryan returns to the door, glancing down toward the young mother, “We’re going to get everything prepped now. Do you want to wear a plastic covering as well?”

“Do I need to?” Char glances over toward him, something about the man putting her at ease. She isn’t sure if it’s his kind brown eyes or his moderately deep voice. She lets her son continue to rest against her and wasn’t about to let the babe go if she didn’t need to. Seeing the slight negative shake of his head, Char smirks toward him.

“Fantastic.” Ryan grins a bit, his eyes bright.

Bernie notices something between the two, but she isn’t quite sure what it is just yet. Gently taking her partner’s hand after she stands, “We’re going to get a breath of fresh air. Start thinking about what you’d like for dinner.”

“We’re all getting curry. Would you like for me to add you lot to the list?” Ryan glances around to the women in the room, “we don’t ask just anyone. Just the people we like...kind of. People we kind of like.” It garners a soft huff of a chortle from his patient’s mother.

“Curry sounds fantastic. We’ll talk to the nurses’ station desk.” Bernie nods, pulling Serena from the room before she has the chance to truly protest.

“We should make sure they-” Serena grabs her girlfriend’s arm in the hall, stalling their walk as she gestures toward the room once they’re out of earshot of the people inside. She stops her train of thought suddenly, staring toward the other woman, “wait a minute, I know that look.”

Bernie shrugs, nonchalantly, “Irresistibility.”
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

Knowing it will quell her doubts, Ryan Anand sucks up to the Medical Director.

Despite her own anxieties, Charlotte convinces her parents to go on home.

Chapter Notes

Happy St. Patrick’s Day! Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine. Which is far more important in today’s world than ever before.

Be safe and celebrate, kids! <3

Cole rests within a large hospital bed, intravenous line secured to his neck. The side rail of the bed down next to his mother, allowing Charlotte access to stroke his back when he begins to fuss. However, he hasn’t really been moving much. Char takes a bite of her coconut curry chicken and rice, finally able to relax for the first time in an entire day. Her feet rest against the end of the bed’s undercarriage, “This is actually really good.”

“Agreed. I’m shocked they had goat.” Bernie smirks, “I’m in my glory, quite honestly.”

“Everything was a type of curry.” Serena doesn’t eat, the closed container of food in her lap. She’s far too worried to eat currently.

“My Mum is Pakistani and my step-father is Jamaican. They own a little hole in the wall a few kilometers from here.” Ryan Anand offers from his position in the doorway, “I kind of get whatever I want from them for my staff...and I pay them five hundred quid at the end of the month. I figure it’s a good trade off for ordering once a week.”

“It’s delicious, thanks for including us.” Bernie nods, smiling a little toward the young man. “Any news?”

“Viral. Viral infection, which is much better than bacterial and easier to treat.” Ryan offers his patient’s mother a warm smile as he holds up the tablet computer, “I brought over the results if you wanted to have a second look, Ms. Campbell.”
Serena can’t help except be slightly impressed that the young doctor could read her so well. She accepts the computer from the young man, looking over the results herself. “What’s your course of treatment?”

“Well, I’d still really like to get a CT scan to make sure there hasn’t been any swelling of the brain and spinal cord.” Ryan nods, “and I’d like to keep him for a couple nights at least.” He glances back to Charlotte, “however, if the CT scan comes back regular, there’s no reason we can’t release him tomorrow to your care… and the care of two incredibly talented surgeons... if you know of any.” His tone sarcastic, having been informed far more by the consultant of the ward of the accomplishments of his patient’s grandparents.

Char blushes a little, smiling some, “I trust you, Dr. Anand. CT sounds like a great idea.”

Serena gives the tablet back to the young doctor, “Agreed.”

Bernie takes another bite of her food, leaning against the wall, “and Char will be able to stay with him overnight, correct?”

“Oh, yes, of course. I expected that you would.” Ryan smirks, quickly glancing toward his patient’s mother again, “I’ll have someone bring in a blanket and extra pillow... though I imagine you’ll be holding onto Cole through the night.”

“Probably.” Char smirks a little, “Just having him there at the moment and... not in my arms is rather uncomfortable for me.” She glances over toward her son, “but... I know he’s hurting when I hold him for too long.” She stops, sucking in her breath as she attempts to maintain composure.

Ryan places a reassuring hand on her shoulder, crouching next to her chair, “Yeah, but we’re giving him the proper medications and things should be getting better for him. Hopefully back to normal after a week or two.” He shrugs a little, “I say that’s pretty good.”

“I don’t even know how he got sick in the first place.”

“Don’t really need to. It could be one of many things, if not a mixture of things. We’ll never know.” Ryan starts, “However, we have a game plan now. We know what it is, we know how to treat it, and he’s in the best place he can possibly be right now. Everything will turn out, yeah?”
Char closes her eyes a moment, whispering, “Yeah.”

“Good.” Ryan stands, “I’ll be back shortly. Need to do some rounds before my shift is over. Can’t spend all my time with you...Deputy CEO might be watching.” He isn’t startled in the slightest by Bernie’s honk of a laugh as he takes his exit.

“I like him.” Bernie motions with a fork toward the doorway.

“Berenice.” Serena scowls, finally opening her container of food, using the plastic fork provided as well. She takes a bite of her chicken korma, raising an eyebrow with her delight. “That is absolutely delicious.”

“Would this quisine be considered Paki-can? Or...Jam-istanian?” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, taking another bite, “Not that I care in the very least, he refused to accept any money from us. Free food is good food...except this actually is ridiculously good.” She pauses when Cole starts to whimper, leaning over the bed, “I’m right here, baby.” She says softly, placing a hand on his back and her platter of food on the side table. When he starts to cry a bit more, she finally lifts him into her arms carefully.

Bernie stands a bit straighter, watching her daughter and grandson closely, “He shouldn’t be hungry. Is he wet?” Upon her daughter’s negative shake of a head, she continues, “Push your call button. He may require more pain medication.”

Char hums softly, the boy starting to calm as he takes his mother’s smell in and listening to her voice. She pushes the button anyhow, “Everything is okay, Coley. They’re going to take you for a scan, but...I’m not about to go anywhere...even though your grandmothers are definitely going to go home tonight. First night in over a year that they have the house to themselves...hopefully they won’t squander it.”

“Oh for god sake.” Serena mumbles, “Honestly, we’ll just go home and sleep. Our...romantic pursuits are nothing of your concern.”

“Wild tantric sex, Cole. I mean, good for them at their age.” Charlotte continues, mumbling slightly, only demonstrating that she’s calmed quite a bit since her son was admitted to hospital, mostly because of Dr. Anand’s hospitality.
Bernie sees her girlfriend’s blush spread to her ears, causing her to guffaw again. Her daughter had a penchant of making Serena uncomfortable in the best way possible and it always causes her to laugh. Though when she hears her grandson begin to cry hard again, she calms herself quickly, “I’m so sorry, Cole.”

“Okay, baby.” Seeing the doctor that was with her during the boy’s birth enter in the doorway, Charlotte smiles softly, “Harry, hello.”

Harry Linstrom, the young F1 from the maternity portion of Otter ward grins a bit, “I thought I saw Cole’s name on the board. So sorry to hear he’s poorly.” She folds her arms over her chest, “Does he need more pain medication? Sounds like he’s having a rough time.” The nervous look on the patient’s mother’s face says it all. All that needs to be said anyway.

“I reckon so. Since he isn’t able to tell us what the issue is.” Char nods, beginning to feel in over her head about the entire thing. She’s able to display a sense of calmness, even letting her sense of humor show quite a bit. “I was expecting him to turn into the moody, pouty type as a teenager. Not so much now.”

Smirking a little, Harry raises an amused eyebrow, “I was actually coming to take you down to imaging. I can give him something while we’re there.” She motions with a light swipe of her hand, “I’ll even push you in a wheelchair if you want to keep holding him.”

Charlotte glances over toward her parents, “Why don’t you two go on home? I’ll um...I’ll keep you both updated.”

Bernie nods a little, giving an understanding closed mouth smile. “Come on, Campbell.” Taking her partner’s hand when the woman stands next to her, “Serena’s in tomorrow, but I’ll come and sit with you bright and early.” She can see the look in her daughter’s eyes. “Everything is going to be fine, Char.”

Nodding absently, Char answers quietly, “We’ll be home soon. Make the most of a quiet house, eh?” She flashes a quick smirk, following the F1 to the hall.

Serena squeezes Bernie’s hand, “You should phone Cameron.”

Bernie licks her lips, her calm facade starting to crack itself, “If I know my son, he isn’t going to be too happy.”
“He’ll get over it.” Serena lays her head on the woman’s shoulder for a moment, “Charlotte may look like you, but Cameron acts just like you...whether you realize it or not. Just like you would have if you were on Keller today, he’ll probably rush down from Darwin...complain that he wasn’t told sooner, and never want to leave their sides.”

After a moment of silence, Bernie finally speaks, “Cole’s really lucky to have him for an uncle.”

“I think Cameron is the lucky one. Cole is an amazing boy.” Serena takes a moment to place a gentle kiss on her girlfriend’s lips, “Okay. Quiet house. Delicious food. Let’s follow Charlotte’s suggestion and make the most of it.” She keeps holding her fiance’s hand as they finally leave the room, not about to let it go until they arrive home.
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

Bernie and Serena manage to have some alone time, but find it hard to sleep in an empty house.

Cameron messages his mother after Cole takes a turn for the worst.

Charlotte lashes out at staff when they lack answers.

“Okay.” Bernie sighs, leaning over to turn on the bedside lamp located on her nightstand. “Whatever is on your mind, let’s hear it.” She had been holding onto the woman and couldn’t fall asleep because of her tossing and turning. “Are you hot? Is this a hot flash thing, or...” She shrugs, “did you want to turn the telly on for some white noise?”

Serena raises an eyebrow, turning to her side to face her partner, “Aren’t you the slightest bit worried?”

“Tremendously worried, but I’m also very tired and I know you are as well. You need to sleep, even more than I do since you’re in tomorrow.” Bernie lazily glances over toward the other woman, “I’d offer to take your shift, but I know you don’t appreciate how I keep an office.”

“We shared an office for a year...over a year. You were fine while I was there.” Serena smirks slightly, amused by her partner and knowing exactly what she was talking about, “No. You need be with Charlotte and Cole tomorrow. If he’s released, make sure they’re settled here.”

“You don’t think he’ll be released tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.” Serena answers honestly, “luck has never exactly been on this family’s side.”

“Something needs to give, doesn’t it?” Bernie replies softly, “if we had just...seen it sooner. If we stayed up with him and saw the rash or noticed...something. There were so many tells-”

“Everything also said the flu. Things happen.”
“Shouldn’t have with him.” Bernie says quickly, then stops herself, “I remember once when I was on leave and home, Cameron had gotten an appendicitis. He was maybe...four? I was pregnant with Charlotte at the time. I never thought it was an appendicitis. He was too young. It never once crossed my mind.” She looks forward, taking a moment to inhale and exhale. “Marcus was on some...business conference for a week. In that time, I nearly killed our son.”

“You wouldn’t have allowed it to get that far.” Serena shakes her head, “and we did our best at the time. We tried to ensure hydration, kept him as comfortable as we possibly could with dry nappies, even allowed him to vomit on us...several times.” She smirks, “aside from not noticing a rash that spread while we were all sleeping...I think we did just fine. Don’t you?”

Bernie doesn’t really know how to respond, not having thought of it that way. “Why not take something to help you fall asleep?” After the attack on Boxing Day months prior, her therapist had prescribed a simple sleep medication when she was feeling far too anxious to fall asleep. Though Serena never spoke to her about it, Bernie had seen the bottle in Serena’s nightstand and knew instantly what it was for. “And I’ll hold onto you...or I can put on a film. Whatever will help, but you need the rest, Campbell.”

Clearing her throat, Serena had never realized that Bernie knew she was taking something. Multiple things from the anxiety of the Boxing day incident. Some of it she had taken prior because of Elinor’s death, but the doses were increased on most of them. “They will shut me down for at very least eight hours. I’ve only four to sleep at this point. I won’t be up in time to-”

“You don’t need to wake so early. You have a later shift. Let yourself sleep in.”

“I wanted to sit with Charlotte and Cole before my shift started.” Serena sighs a little, “That was my ulterior motive for setting my clock to seven.”

“Your shift starts at two. You’ll be exhausted by the time you go to AAU.” Bernie points out, “I’m not going over until at least ten, if not a bit later in order to take her lunch along with me. It still leaves you an hour or two before going to your unit at that point.”

Serena leans into her girlfriend’s side, “I’m also not used to a quiet house anymore...or skipping the nightly routine we’ve established over the past few months.” Feeling Bernie’s arm wrap around her as she listens to Bernie’s heartbeat, turns out it’s a type of white noise for her.

“Agreed. Though, I was never used to quiet in the first place.” She smirks to herself a little, “between Cam being as wild as he was as a child and an Afghan field hospital, there was never going to be quiet.”
“Was he that bad?” Serena smiles slightly, amused. She yawns, her blinking becoming slow.

“Oh, a terror.” Bernie lifts her arm as it’s wrapped around her partner, gently running her nails through the other woman’s short hair. “I once returned from Kabul and went to surprise the children at school. They were a bit older at the time. Char was over the moon and then I went to surprise Cameron and there he was, in the headmaster’s office. He had a black eye and a bruised cheek. The other boy was there as well with a bag of ice to his nose. Same day I returned, I had to take him home because he was suspended.”

Serena finally closes her eyes, “Surprised it didn’t hurt his chance for university.”

“You and me both. I suppose they let both boys off the hook since it was a losing game for them both. Clean fight. Cameron has a bit of a mouth on him and the other boy just reacted. Then Cam defended himself.” Bernie tilts her head over, hearing the very soft snoring from her partner. It causes her to smile a little, as she’s able to sleep just about anywhere herself. She’d have no trouble getting back to sleep. She sees the sudden brightness of her mobile filling the room from it’s position next to her, having turned off the vibrating feature while they sleep.

Cameron lets his sister lean against him as they work on her son. Using a free hand to send his mother a text message, Cole had seizure. Brain swelling. You should have let me know sooner. Had to find out from staff. “This can happen, Char. However, he’s in the best place.”

Charlotte breaks away from her brother, feeling him still hold onto her wrist, “Who is at fault here?”

“No one is at fault.” Harry shakes her head toward the distraught mother, “This is a side effect. It isn’t seen often with viral meningitis, but it does happen sometimes. This is one of those times.” She exhales as the boy seems to finally be calming, “His fever returned. It’s just a bunch of things at once, Ms. Wolfe.”

“His HR is elevated, BP is elevated. You’ve been pumping him full of medication to keep him from feeling pain and I just agreed without even asking what it was.” Char continues, fighting against Cameron’s pulling of her hand. Her tone frosty, and serious. “You’re telling me that none of you recognized that something else could have been wrong? Fleur told me before that you’re all able to see patient monitors at the nurse’s station in this ward.”

“That’s true. However, because his levels were elevated from the time of admittance, we thought they’d have come down by now with treatment.” Harry sighs softly, “Listen, Charlotte, it’s just one
“Don’t you finish that sentence.” Charlotte hisses, feeling her brother finally take hold of her upper body to pull her back.

“Okay, okay.” Cameron pulls his sister from the room, holding onto her. “You need to calm down. Staff doesn’t need it and Cole certainly doesn’t need it.”

“Cole risks permanent, irreversible brain damage because of one of those things? Are you honestly trying to-”

“No, I’m not trying to do anything. I’m telling you this not only as your brother, but as Cole’s uncle...also as someone who works here, anger benefits no one.” Cam feels her calm down slightly, holding her up as her legs go to jelly. “I know you’re worried. We’re all worried, but we can’t go crazy from it.”

“I’m his mother. I’m supposed to protect him.” Charlotte chokes out, feeling as Cam lets her slowly go to the floor while he continues to hold onto her from behind. “I’m supposed to keep him from getting sick and hold him when he does...I’m,” She swallows, inhaling suddenly, “I can’t even do that.”

Cameron listens to his sister intently, not knowing all that’s going on. He furrows his brow, “I’m not going anywhere tonight. Uncle Cam is on the case, yeah?” He knows she won’t respond. He doesn’t really expect her to. He does, however, continue to hold his sister until he’s able to get a nurse to bring him a sedative for her and an overnight cot as well.
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Cameron asks his mother the question no one wanted to.

Upon learning she's been sedated again, Charlotte demands answers.

Cameron watches his nephew sleep. Never having the opportunity to really do so since the boy was born. He reaches a hand over, gently rubbing the infant’s back, garnering a tired smirk from the boy when he opens his eyes. “There’s Uncle Cam’s best mate.” He finds himself saying just above a whisper. When the boy reaches a grabby hand toward him, he gently lifts the boy from the bed, holding him against his chest. “Right back where we started, isn’t it?”

Bernie stands in the doorway, her eyes slightly reddened as she had probably been crying that morning before rushing in. She exhales slowly, “He has you wrapped around his fingers.”

Knowing of his mother’s stealthy ways, Cam doesn’t need to look up, he’s used to this, “He always will.” Dark circles under his eyes, he slowly glances over toward his mother. “You got my text.”

She nods slowly, moving in more. She sees her daughter completely asleep on an overnight cot not far from the bed. “You should have called me.” Seeing her son’s amused expression, “I know, I’m being hypocritical, I’m sorry. We were just...really focused on him at the time and you were working the graveyard. It honestly didn’t cross my mind to call you then. I apologize.”

Cam nods a little, “It’s okay. We’re both here now.” He sees her take a seat on the edge of the bed once containing his nephew, “I gave her a sedative. She uh...” Cameron shakes his head slowly, “She kind of went off on staff...and I didn’t want her to be booted over nothing.”

Bernie folds her arms casually, “I had given her one the night prior.” She doesn’t go into it really, “She’s having a hard time controlling emotions as of late.”

It causes Cameron to pause, “I have to ask the question because I feel like it needs asking.” His eyes slowly lift to meet his mother’s “Is she okay to take care of Cole?”

She won’t admit that she’s been thinking about it. Won’t admit that she and Serena are usually the
ones tending to the boy while Charlotte is either locked in her room or out spending time at the boy’s father’s bedside. Bernie nods a little, “She’s fine. I think it’s just a bit of postpartum depression, not to mention she’s been through several traumatic experiences within recent years. It just seems to all be catching up with her. We will not condemn her for that.”

“I’m not saying we condemn her, Mum. I’m saying maybe she needs more help than just...” Cameron sighs a little, “I wasn’t supposed to say anything. She’s skipped her past three appointments with psych. Rescheduling at the last minute, I reckon. She listed me as her emergency contact for them, so they rang me asking how or where she was. As if I know anything about anything.” He pauses, “Probably didn’t list you or Serena because she knew they would try phoning.”

Bernie looks down, attempting to sort things in her head, “Serena’s mentioned that the psych will...offer or...” She tilts her head to the side, “and this isn’t in any way a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality, but she’ll offer ways for Serena and Char to work on their issues together.” She hums a soft chortle to herself, “Makes more sense now.”

Cam tilts his head to the side, looking down toward his nephew who hasn’t fallen back asleep, instead just staring up toward his grandmother. “I think he wants you.”

She offers the pitiful appearing infant a soft smile, gently taking him in her arms when her son hands him up. Bernie rubs his back a bit, careful of his wires. “You’ve given us a proper scare, haven’t you?” Bernie notices the babe’s smile toward her.

He’s glad he could change the subject, still wanting to give his sister the benefit of the doubt. Cameron folds his arms, “Ryan Anand, the doctor treating him, said this will probably push him back a bit, requiring a longer stay, but it shouldn’t be too bad. Maybe only a few more days.”

Bernie takes the seat now vacated by her son, knowing she and her grandson usually do this most nights when she gets home from work. “What can you tell me about Dr. Anand?” She doesn’t bother to glance toward her son, focused entirely on Cole as she gently reaches over to the bed, pulling over the soft blanket that had been covering the boy previously.

Cam shrugs a little, “Top of his class in med school. We went to primary together. Good guy.” He gives a quick glance to his sister out of habit before continuing, “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”
The young man displays an unimpressed look, “You rarely ask a question like that without reason.”

Bernie tilts her head to the side, “I just want to know who is treating my grandson. If he can be trusted.”

“So, you thought best to ask me that question instead of your fiance who happens to be Medical Director of the hospital and could freely pull his personnel file and CV?” Cam smirks ever so slightly. “Did something happen?” When she doesn’t answer, he decides to ask a different question, “Or was it just something you noticed.” He uses his mother’s term against her in this instance. Something she’d always say when she had an ulterior motive behind a question or a suggestion.

About to answer with something sarcastic, Bernie turns her head toward the doorway to see the man in question knocking on the frame. “Morning.”

Ryan offers her a smile, “I thought I’d find Mum awake since his levels are finally starting to settle.” He glances over toward his patient’s still sleeping mother. “No matter. He’s doing much better than what he was a few hours ago. I’m actually impressed.”

“He’s like that when his Gran has him.” Cameron offers, knowing his mother never would. “He gets whatever he wants with her. Both of his grandmothers.” He wonders, sometimes, if his Mum was the same way with him when he was this small, having only really remembered the bad portions of his childhood when he was a bit older.

“I think it’s in the grandparent handbook.” Ryan steps in more, crouching to look the baby in the eye, “Hey there, fella.” He exhales a soft chuckle when he receives a tired grin from the baby. “I’m just going to take vitals while I’m here and you have him proper comfortable, if you don’t mind.” Seeing the subtle nod from the patient’s grandmother, he continues, giving a quick glance toward Cameron, “Heard Ms. Wolfe wasn’t...didn’t take the setback too well.”

Cam folds his arms across his chest, “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. She isn’t usually-”

“She was a scared mother. Think we haven’t seen plenty of that on this ward?” Ryan sounds amused, sliding the eartips of his stethoscope into his ears before softly pressing the small diaphragm onto the boy’s back. Much smaller than they usually are because of the ward itself. “Bit muffled.” He sighs a little, “Reckon he’d pull at a nasal cannula much?”

“I think he’s too tired to do much of anything. All his energy is going to fighting off the virus.”
Bernie glances over toward the young doctor next to her, watching as he stands, setting up the tubing carefully.

Charlotte begins to stir from her place on the portable bed, bringing her arm to shield her eyes from the brightness coming through the windows. Her body feels heavy and she isn’t quite sure what to make of it. Only remembering bits and pieces from the night before. Her vision blurry as she attempts to make out the other people in the room. “Blimey.” She whispers to herself, feeling as if she’s hung over. “What happened?”

“Guess you were really tired last night.” Cameron glances over toward her, his mother knowing instantly that he probably just knocked her out to save them anymore embarrassment. “Ryan’s putting him on some oxygen. Did you want some too?” His tone teasing his baby sister a bit.

“He was…Cole was shaking. Seizing. Is-” Charlotte pushes herself to sit up a bit more, “Is he doing okay?”

“Right as rain.” Cameron moves closer to her, sitting on the edge of the cot, “How about you?”

“I don’t have meningitis.” Charlotte replies quickly, “So…better than he is, I’d reckon.” She folds her arms, “Mum?”

“Yes. Dr. Anand giving our soldier a bit of a once over since he’s earned a few extra days here. I’m trying not to talk much so he can hear.” Bernie smiles softly toward the young doctor as he waves his hand that she was okay. “Feeling like a ton of bricks fell on you?”

Char doesn’t answer the question, not knowing if she should, “I could use some tea.”

“I can do that.” Cameron nods, “I’ll nick some from their employee quarters.”

“There’s a tin on the top of the bookshelf. I keep my good chai for tough days there.” Ryan offers, taking out his penlight from his shirt pocket, carefully shining it into the baby’s eyes and noticing him trying to turn away from it. “Sensitivity to light.” He mumbles, shrugging. Common, he tells himself. “I think I’m going to get him an MRI scheduled-”

“He just had a CT yesterday.” Bernie glances to him, “Is that really necessary?”
“I’d like to rule out—”

“Tell me the truth.” Bernie’s eyes focus on the young doctor, seeing her son standing to object across the other side of the room through her peripheral vision, she lifts a hand to stop him. “You don’t need to sugar coat things or use colloquial terms. I strictly want the truth.”

Ryan stands again, his hands sliding to his hips, “Everything he’s displaying is saying bacterial. His progression, his turn, everything. His cerebrospinal fluid was colorless. However, he has elevated protein levels and lowered glucose levels a day out. So, I’d like for them to retest them...and I wish to...” He’s taken a liking to this family, it makes most things harder when he does, “I need to make sure there isn’t any more swelling on the brain and if there is, I need to put things in motion to ensure that the symptoms do not harm Cole long term.”

Charlotte listens to the man, pushing herself to sit up more, scowling slightly, “Your doctors said he was going to be okay.”

“And he, more likely than not, will be.” Ryan nods.

“More likely than not ... What the hell is that supposed to mean?” She pushes herself to stand, still unsteady on her feet from the sedative only hours prior. “My son is my world. I went through hell in order to have him...and I’ll do the same in order to keep him safe.” Char doesn’t lean on Cam, stepping ahead of him, but feeling as he takes hold of her arm to hold her back from the man, “So, you had better come up with some cohesive answers, Dr. Anand.”

Ryan meets Char’s eye, “Of course. However, you should still be prepared, Ms. Wolfe. I’m an honest man and when I say I will do everything I possibly can to ensure your son’s recovery, I mean that.” He pauses, “Do you trust me?” Ryan notices a subtle nod from the patient’s mother, doing the same in return before turning to leave the room.
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

When his friends raise concerns over the health of their daughter, Ric plays a neutral party.

Bernie convinces her daughter to take better care of herself.

Chapter Notes

26 weeks old.

A week. Charlotte has hardly left her son’s side. Only stepping away to use the restroom. Her hair pulled back in a greasy, messy bun. Her body doesn’t smell, but she feels grimy. No one could talk her out of stepping away for more than a couple of moments, not even wanting to eat. She’s lost nearly three kilograms by now, strictly from abstaining from eating and living mostly on coffee and tea brought to her from various staffers and her parents.

Ric Griffin stands in the doorway, a small paper bag in one hand and her usual order of tea in his other hand. “Excuse me, Ms. Wolfe, am I interrupting?”

His voice causes her to smile ever so slightly, a different face. “Of course not. Mum and Serena are working at the moment, so you...have us all to yourself.” Charlotte waves her hand while not moving her eyes from her son just yet, “Come in, Ric. It’s...really good to see you.” Her voice seems tired, her face displaying a soft pallor with dark circles under her eyes.

“I do wish it were under better circumstances.” Ric exhales slowly, finally garnering her attention, “I brought you something.”

“Oh, bless.” Char’s eyes glass over, lowering her view to that of the bag. It isn’t that she doesn’t want to eat the lemon pound cake that she knows is in the bag, but she doesn’t believe she deserves the treat. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“Of course I did.” He offers a soft smirk, reaching over to place the paper bag and paper cup of tea on the nightstand beside the bed. The boy on a course of oxygen and various intravenous lines. Ric moves to the end of the bed, picking up the boy’s patient file, fingering through it. “They’re keeping
the swelling at bay and he seems to be...retaining and passing fluids normally. Cole is doing very well.”

Charlotte doesn’t reply, glancing back to her son, asleep in the bed. “Two steps forward, three steps back. I’ve stopped listening to others. I’m just...not planning on...counting chickens before they hatch.” She shakes her head negatively ever so slightly. “He’s the most important thing in my entire life, Ric. I can’t lose him.” Char’s chin trembles and tears flood her eyes more. It’s been a cycle of this for her since Cole’s seizure a week prior.

“You’re not going to lose him.” Ric sighs a little, pulling an empty chair over to the opposite side of the boy’s bed so she’d be more likely to look toward him. He continues, “You won’t. Not with the improvements he’s made.”

“He’s gotten worse. Mum and Serena were tending to him and he was fine. I tend to him and...he’s like this.” Char pulls her hand away from her son’s nappy covered bottom, “This is my fault. I should have left him alone.”

“That isn’t how meningitis works. Things often get worse before they get better.” Ric explains, attempting to be very careful with his words, not wanting to trigger the young woman’s anxiety. He doesn’t like the look of her, “He’s improving again...and vitals are stable this time. However, if you aren’t well, you will be of no use to him when he needs you to look after him.”

“I’m fine.” Charlotte folds her arms, eyes drifting over toward him. “I’ll eat your cake later. I’m just not hungry at the moment.”

“How long has it been since you’ve eaten something substantial? Not just a piece of fruit or a pastry.” Ric pauses, continuing after a moment, “or has there even been those things? Just tea and coffee.” She looks away again and it causes him to smirk a little, “You know, if you’re going to be my next ex-wife, you’re going to need to take care of yourself because I work long hours and-”

Char smirks ever so slightly, knowing he’d bring up their playful banter during her time staying in the consultant office of AAU during her pregnancy. “I’d do whatever I wanted.” Her eyes close a little, she’s exhausted. Lifting a hand, she runs it over her hair. “And you’d like it or I’d take you for everything.”

“I’d expect no less.” Ric watches her, “Would you mind if I did some vitals on you?”
“I’m fine.” Char shakes her head again, “I’m completely fine. Promise.”

“You could just humor me.”

“I could, but I won’t.” Charlotte blinks, “I’m still making milk. I’ve...pumped for him. So, means I must be fine.”

“Or it’s just draining you even more.” Ric shakes his head, “if not me, how about your mother or Serena?” He offers, “Or Cameron.”

“What can I do in order to get you to let this go?” Char asks, only obtaining a look from the man. She sighs, “Fine.” She mumbles, “I don’t know what you think you’re going to find.”

“We’ll discover that together.” Ric moves around to her side of the bed, reaching into his own pocket to retrieve his stethoscope and pulling over the small trolley containing a thermometer and blood pressure all-in-one. This particular one was left in the room as not to contaminate more rooms. Since Charlotte was already exposed, she should be fine. He fits a larger cuff onto the machine before wrapping it onto the young mother’s arm. “You’re starting to smell, you know.”

“You always know exactly what to say to get me all hot around the collar.” Charlotte smirks a little.

Fast and irregular pulse, low blood pressure. “Dizzy?” When she shakes her head negatively, Ric raises an eyebrow, “Don’t lie to me, please.”

“If you’re going to answer your own questions to me, what’s the point for asking them in the first place?” Char glances up toward the man standing over her, sighing, “Headache.”

“Malnutrition and you’re dehydrated,” Ric answers quickly, “You need more than just the tea or coffee. How about I get you an IV going?”

“How about you mind your own damn business?” Char snatches her arm away from him once he removes the blood pressure cuff from her upper arm. “Is this why you came? To harass me?” She scowls, “I thought it would be to visit Cole.”
“I came to visit both Cole and his mother.” Ric pushes the all-in-one machine back to where it was, “Your parents are incredibly worried about you.”

“I’m not sick.” Char answers loudly, having heard it from the women and her brother, “Bloody hell, my son has meningitis. I’m his mother, I’m going to stay with him while he’s in hospital, even this hospital. He doesn’t have a father to take time with him, so I’m on my lonesome. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You aren’t on your lonesome.”

“Says you.” She continues to glare.

“You have your parents and Cameron, you even have me. You’re allowed to take care of yourself as well.” Ric watches, moving to the foot of the bed. He notices his friend in the doorway. “On your lunch period?”

“Finished for the day.” Bernie explains, having heard her daughter yelling from the end of the hall as she was on her way. “Char, why don’t we get you washed up while Ric is here?” Things with her daughter during her grandson’s time here was shaky at best, really only because the young woman wasn’t caring for herself.

“I can’t leave him.” Charlotte mumbles.

“Sweetheart, you have to. Twenty minutes, tops.” Bernie tilts her head to the side, her slim fitting jeans and subtle geometric plaid shirt underneath of her jacket. “I’ll be with you and Ric has my number on speed dial.” She pauses, glancing over toward the man, “is that a thing people still do?”

“It is, because you and Serena are there.” Ric smirks a little, amused by his friend. “Charlotte, if I’m going to be Cole’s stepfather, I need to spend some time with him, right?” He know it would garner slight amusement from the young woman, especially since her parents didn’t know about their playful banter, “I can get a vitamin and saline drip ready for when you return.”

Bernie knew that Ric could be one of the only people to get through to her daughter. Someone impartial. “I have some long sleeved undershirts you can wear with a pair of scrubs. We won’t be long at all. I promise.”
Charlotte carefully stands, leaning over the bed to softly kiss her son’s light-brunette hair. “I’ll be right back, sweet boy.” She replies softly in his ear before taking her mother’s hand and letting the woman guide her from the room. She knows these people are right. Knows she should have listened to her mother days ago. Her self-imposed starvation isn’t something she’d done before, but she knows she deserves it. She closes her eyes a little as tears begin to fill them again. Her mother guiding her, “I’m sorry.”

“Everything is okay.” Bernie wraps a reassuring arm around her daughter, “when we finish up, Dr. Vickers has offered to come down for a session. We just need to let her know when you’re ready. Is that something you’d be willing to-”

Char nods a little, cutting her off slightly, her body shaking, though she isn’t aware of it. “I think I need it. I...I haven’t been going. I’ve been busy.”

“I know.” Bernie nods slowly, “it’s okay though. We can turn that around, right?” She slowly escorts her toward the employee showers and locker room. Bernie leans over, softly kissing her daughter at the hairline. “You’re not alone for any of this. We can do it together...as a family.”

The corner of Charlotte’s mouth turns up a little, “I’d like that.”
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Upon realizing she's having a rough go, Ryan does his best to include his patient's mother in things.

When Charlotte admits she can't control her emotions, Annette makes a "house" call.

Charlotte rushes back to her son’s room, only to hear the boy gabbing. Awake and speaking with Ric. Of course, he’d get the boy to speak again. She finally gets to the door, only to realize that it wasn’t Ric Griffin that the boy was speaking to at all, but Ryan Anand. “Doctor...where’s Ric?”

“Trauma, I’m guessing same place your mother went off to.” Ryan smirks ever so slightly, the baby sitting on his lap as he rests in the chair next to the bed. “MIT...Multiple Injury Trauma, but I’m sure neither of them would have left if they didn’t need to.” Glancing to the boy who begins babbling toward him, “that’s what I just told your Mum.”

She can’t help except to smirk toward him, taking the seat that was previously occupied by Ric Griffin, “At least he didn’t leave Cole by himself.” Charlotte shrugs, not bothered in the least actually. Surprisingly. “My therapist is on her way down to...visit.”

“I was told that I need to attach this to your arm.” Ryan motions up toward the bag of saline and vitamin solution atop of a IV pole. He stands, carefully setting the boy to sit up in bed and pulling the side rail up to contain him. “Seeing as Mr. Griffin’s like...third in charge, I’m just going to do as ordered.” He pulls the pole over toward the young woman.

“You don’t need to listen-” Charlotte attempts, only to receive a knowing look from the doctor, causing her to blush a little, “Fine.” She holds her arm out.

“Keller berry? I’d at least go for Darwin navy.” Ryan teases a little, “Either way, they look great on you. If I didn’t know any better, I’d add you to my team outright based solely on your kit.” He carefully uses an alcohol swab to prep the area on the inside of her forearm. His hands soft, caring. “Not used to inserting an IV into an adult these days.”

“Should be easier. Bigger veins.” Char teases, lowering her eyes to watch what he’s doing. He inserts the needle effortlessly, “See? They’ll make you a proper doctor yet.” It garners a chuckle from the man’s lips. She glances over, seeing her son clapping and offering an amused squeal.
Ryan doesn’t realize he’s still holding the woman’s hand as he glances toward the boy in the bed, “Alright, mate. Let’s not get carried away.” He teases him, then glances back to his patient’s mother, letting go of her hand with a blush. “Two things, both good news.” He moves to lift the boy back up since he seems so jolly at the moment. Ryan returns to the seat he was in before, “One, I reckon he can take a proper feeding or bottle from you. He can probably hold it himself-”

“I’ve tried to get him to hold a bottle himself for months, he’s far too lazy.” Charlotte shakes her head, amused with her son.

“Two, we’re going to order pizza. Do you like pineapple and ham?”

Her eyes widen ever so slightly, “You’re speaking my language. I love it.”

“Great, I’ll bring you a few slices.” Ryan grins, he has an amazing smile, “I was expecting you to turn your nose up and demand pepperoni or cheese.”

Charlotte bites her lip a little, knowing she probably looks like a loon with her excitement over some pizza, “You don’t need to do that. I don’t want to take a slice from anyone else.” She shakes her head a little, glancing up to the IV bag, take the damn pizza, she tells herself.

“I’m the only one that likes ham and pineapple around here and I’d be a fatty if I ate the whole pie on my lonesome.” Ryan nods, carefully and casually removing Cole’s nasal cannula, glad to see his blood oxygen levels remain stable on the monitor. “I never met another person who liked the combination.”

“Just my Mum and I…and Jason, he’s…kind of like my stepbrother at this point. That’s my fault mostly.” When the doctor seems confused, Char shakes her head, “My family is weird.”

“No, how would him liking pineapple and ham on pizza be your fault?”

“Well, I craved it constantly when I was pregnant and my father came over one night and I asked Jason to just try it, he’s kind of stuck in his ways when it comes to trying new things, and he had like…four slices.” Charlotte smirks a little. “You probably think my family sounds absolutely bizarre and-”
“They’re your family. Everyone has their own mixture of family.” Ryan shrugs, giving the baby his teething ring that was in the bed. “My biological father died before I was born, plane crash. My Mum got with my Dad when I was like...three or something, my stepfather. So, I just tell people I’m part Jamaican now.” He smirks when he hears her soft chortle, “it’s my family though. Might not make sense to other people, but it’s mine and it makes sense to me.”

Charlotte nods a little, “You’re right.” She lifts her head when her therapist softly knocks on the doorframe, “Ms. Vickers, Dr. Anand.” She introduces the attractive, older woman. “The little one is my son, Cole.”

“Well, I was confused for a moment.” Vickers teases, watching the young doctor place the babe back into the bed, “I do hope I’m not intruding.”

“No, of course not. I’ve pizza to order.” Ryan glances over giving Char a wink before turning his attention toward the other woman, offering a cordial nod, “Pleasure meeting you, Ms. Vickers, if you’ll excuse me.” He leaves the room after offering the therapist a cordial smile.

“Well, he’s a handsome one, eh?” Vickers closes the door behind herself.

“You should ask him for his number.” Char raises an eyebrow, watching the woman take a seat. “You get to meet Cole now though. I mean, he isn’t in the best shape, but...look at that smile.” She reaches her free hand out to gently stroke the baby’s belly, “He’s getting better.”

Vickers nods, watching her patient, “He is incredibly adorable, has his Mom’s eyes.” She motions to the saline solution hanging from the pole with the line going into the back of the young woman’s hand. “How about you though? It’s been a while.”

“I’m...I’m sorry about that.” Charlotte says quietly, “I didn’t...mean for it to happen in the way it did.”

Vickers watches the young woman, “I want to take a step back. Let’s talk about what happened at the house last week? I haven’t spoken to you since before that. Serena said the two of you went to collect a few of your things.” She said a lot more than that, spoke of blood splatter underneath the pictures and the holes in the walls. It was far worse than she and Bernie ever imagined.

Charlotte nods a little, “It went well.” It didn’t. It really didn’t. She clears her throat a little. “I um...I have a habit of...going above and beyond, getting a little ridiculous when I’m upset and...” She
shrugs, “I guess it happened then. Mum said she needed to sedate me.”

“You guess?” Vickers tilts her head to the side, “You don’t remember?”

The young woman shakes her head negatively. “I can’t, um...” Char starts, falling quiet for a moment as she attempts to find her wording.

“How do you act when-” When her younger patient begins to shake her head negatively, Vickers continues, “You don’t know or you don’t remember?”

“Remember.” Char swallows, carefully lifting her son when he pathetically reaches for her. “I feel like I’m slipping away from myself.” She strokes the babe’s light brunette hair as he leans against her. “And I can’t control it sometimes...most times I can, but...”

“The times where you can’t are becoming more frequent.” Vickers finishes her patient’s thought process, noticing Char’s subtle nod. “Okay.” She thinks for a moment, “Do you feel like you could possibly hurt someone during those times?”

“No...never intentionally.” Charlotte just holds her son tenderly, needing him as much as he needs her. “What are you thinking?”

“I think we should try a stabilizer. Calm the anxiousness.” Vickers offers a kind, closed mouth smile, “is that something you’d be willing to take?”

Swallowing, then leaning her head down to softly place a kiss to her son’s hair, Char waits a moment before answering, “I don’t think I have much choice.”
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

When Marcus tires of being ignored by his daughter, Charlotte reacts negatively.

Serena offers Charlotte her support.

Serena lifts her head, having just finished eating dinner in the confines of the kitchen. The knocking at the door causing a spark of anxiety within her. Anytime anyone comes to the door at this point. Being that Bernie isn’t there with her currently, doesn’t help anything. She takes a deep breath, making her way over and cautiously opens it. “Well...hello.” She doesn’t know what to say to the man standing there.

Marcus has his hands in his pockets as he offers the woman a closed mouth smile. “Serena, hello. I apologize for...slipping over without any forewarning.”

She nods her head a little, stepping aside and opening the door a bit more. “Please, come in.” Serena motions to the room not far from the front door. She closes the door behind the man once he does as requested, following after him. “To what do I owe the...pleasure?”

“I was hoping to speak to Charlotte. I’ve...I’ve been attempting to contact her, but she isn’t taking nor returning my calls.” Marcus shakes his head negatively, “I’ve...I want to help her, but...I reckon she doesn’t want me to.” He clears his throat a little, “Thought maybe I could speak to her.”

“She really needs the rest at the moment.” Serena stands near him, folding her arms. She then realizes he doesn’t know what’s been occuring. “I thought Cameron would have contacted you, Cole’s been in hospital. Meningitis. He’s getting better every day, but-”

“No, no, Cameron did not contact me.” Marcus seems worried, his brow arched in the center. “I could have...I would-”

“Which is why she needs to sleep.” Serena explains calmly, “Charlotte’s been having a...difficult time dealing with the stress.” She doesn’t go into specifics, feeling the need to protect the young woman. “Bernie is staying with Cole in hospital tonight so that Charlotte can get some rest.” She repeats.
“How can I help?” He tries again, seeing her subtle head shake, “Please, Serena, I know you don’t like me. I don’t expect you to. I need to help my daughter and grandson. I need to... I need to do something.” Marcus removes his hands from his pockets, placing them onto his hips, “Allow me to do something.”

“It isn’t about allowing you anything—”

“I didn’t answer my mobile because I didn’t want to.” Charlotte responds, finally moving to the doorway. She had been listening to the conversation. She wasn’t sleeping soundly at all, how could she? However, it was a nice change to be away from the hospital, even if she didn’t want to be. “Why are you here, Dad?”

Glancing over toward his daughter, Marcus seems worried still. “Why didn’t you tell me that Cole was poorly?”

“It slipped my mind.” Char’s voice low, serious. She looks even more like her mother now, he thinks. Sounding more like her every day. “I was focused on my son. I still am... I always will be. Calling you wasn’t even in the top ten things on my mind as my son was having a seizure because of his brain swelling. Calling you wasn’t in the top twenty when we realized his whimpers meant he was in pain.” She folds her arms slowly, “So, Dad, I wasn’t about to call you because focusing on the care of my son was far more important than making you happy.”

“I said nothing about it making me happy, Charlotte.” He begins to shake his head negatively, “I would have been there for you.”

“Doing what, exactly?” Charlotte gives that same look that Bernie gives when she doesn’t believe what’s being said. “Holding my hand?”

“If that’s what you needed.” Marcus begins to nod, wishing his daughter understood just how much he cares for her. He would do anything for her. Absolutely anything. “So much strain on you and those around you, I could have lightened the load.”

“It hasn’t been any strain.” Serena replies simply, softly.

“If you didn’t know Cole was in hospital then what? What about the weeks between his birth and now? What about all the time before that?” A fire starts to rise within Char, “You’re present when it’s convenient for you. Never once did I need to ask for help with my parents. They were just
always there. They were the ones that told me to come home to rest. They’re the ones that are making sure I’m taking care of myself through all of this. I never had to text them to inform them, they are around so often that they just knew.”

Marcus stands a bit straighter when he hears her mention her parents and knows he isn’t included in the term. “I don’t live with you, they do. Of course your mother and Serena would see all of that first because they see you every day-”

“And you should be wanting to.” Charlotte raises her voice a bit, tears forming in her eyes though she isn’t sure if they’re angry tears or disappointed ones.

“Calm down.” Serena wraps an arm around the young woman. “Don’t get yourself in a tizzy over nothing.” She says quietly close to her ear, just squeezing her gently, “Just relax.”

“Char-” Marcus tries.

“I’m sorry, Marcus. I really believe it would be best if you just go on home.” Serena glances over toward him, “Charlotte will contact you when she’s ready...and I’ll ensure that you’re informed of Cole’s developments during his stay in hospital.”

He hadn’t realized how much emotional pain his daughter was feeling. Never thought this visit would end this way, not really. Marcus nods a little, “Thank you, Ms. Campbell.” His voice quiet, looking his daughter up and down again, “I do love you, Charlotte. Whether you believe me or not, I do. You’re my little girl...and you always will be.” He stands there a moment more, sighing as he turns from them, letting himself out of the house.

Charlotte bites the corner of her mouth, her chin trembling a bit more as a tear finally escapes her eye, “Was I his little girl when I lived with Anders?” Her voice soft, wanting to mention it to the man when he was standing there, but not getting the opportunity to. She swallows, clearing her throat a little to calm herself a bit. “I’ve had a lot of time to think while in hospital with Cole. Being alone with one's thoughts...isn’t always the best thing.”

Serena tilts her head to the side, trying to garner the young woman’s attention a bit, “I don’t sleep well alone anymore...and I think we could do for watching a movie tonight to wind down. What say you?” She doesn’t believe it’s best for Charlotte to be alone for right now. Noticing the subtle nod, she offers a soft smile to the young woman, “Very good.”
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

After convincing her daughter to sleep in an actual bed, Bernie stays the night with her grandson.

An unexpected visitor turns up to Cole's hospital room, lending their support.

Chapter Notes

This chapter occurs the same night as the last.

Bit of letting of bygones be bygones goes a very long way.

Bernie chuckles a little toward her grandson as the boy holds onto her comfortably, babbling away.

“Is that so?” His excited, large brown eyes remind her a great deal of her son at this age. “Few more days and they’re going to spring you, you know. Are you excited to go home?”

“I can’t imagine why he wouldn’t be.” Marcus answers from the doorway, his hands in his pockets. “Has he answered you?” He steps in a bit more, amused by the sight of his ex-wife and grandson. Knowing his daughter wouldn’t be around so late, and feeling like he needed to see the boy himself.

Raising an eyebrow, this was the very last person she’d expect to be here, “Did you bribe the person at the front desk?” Bernie is interrupted by her grandson placing a hand to her cheek for her to focus on him again, “Yes, I’m listening to you. I know.”

“Talked my way past.” He smirks a little, stepping in more. Marcus takes a look at the boy’s smiling face, “Looks like Cam.”

“He’s beginning to, yes.” Bernie nods, feeling the need to protect the boy. When Cole realizes there’s another person in the room, he holds onto her more, growing silent. “How did you find out our whereabouts? Not that I’m...upset to see you here, quite the opposite, but...I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Popped round your’s to see Charlotte...because she’s been ignoring my calls and messages. She...she was not happy to see me. Not in the least.” Marcus shrugs a little, huffing a chuckle to
himself. “Not that I was expecting her open arms, but...I wasn’t expecting that.”

“She’s been...having a difficult time as of late.” The last thing Bernie wants to do is dismiss her daughter’s feelings, especially of that toward her father after everything in recent years. “The stress of Cole being in hospital has gotten to her quite a bit.” She glances down to the babe on her chest as she hears him humming softly, causing her to smile slightly. Bernie gently runs her short nails through the boy’s hair. “Before that, actually.”

Lowering himself into a chair not far from them, Marcus raises an interested eyebrow, “Before that?”

Maybe this will cause the man to realize just how much emotional and mental pain their daughter has endured, “We visited the house, the one she shared with Anders, and she had some...setbacks. Well founded setbacks.”

“Why even go there?”

“To collect some of her things. He set things so that she obtains everything now, rather than when he’s dead. Probably the only good thing he’s done for her...besides Cole. The house, the cars. All of it is hers...and she doesn’t want any of it.” Bernie’s eyes glassy, though she ignores her own emotions, “You should go. Look behind the photographs and paintings.”

Marcus can see her change in expression, it was something he didn’t see often during their time together. On occasion, of course, but not often. He doesn’t know what he could possibly say really. He attributed to this and it was something he couldn’t change. “I didn’t know.”

“You haven’t been around...and you didn’t ask.” Bernie swallows, glancing down to the boy again. A blissful expression covering his face, eyebrows lifting with each stroke of his hair. “I had to convince her to go home tonight. Convince her that she needs proper rest that isn’t in hospital and I would stay with the boy instead...and that Cole would never be alone while I’m here.”

“Bern, why didn’t you say anything? You know I’d be here to help.”

“It wasn’t my place...and I reckon she wouldn’t have been very happy about it if I did.” Bernie licks her lips in thought, “Her therapist believes the prospect of mending a relationship with you...upsets her. It’s probably the reason she reacted the way that she did when you last saw her.”
“I’m her father.” Marcus shakes his head, “I don’t understand how it could-”

Bernie exhales slowly, “Did you ever...truly apologize for the things that happened before?” She doesn’t look at him, focusing exclusively on Cole as he continues to relax against her. “Or did you just...pretend it didn’t happen?” She actually did pick up some things about her husband during their twenty-five year marriage. “Because that’s kind of the...worst thing you could have done.”

“I thought we were on better terms, she and I. I thought...she was over all of that-”

“**Over ?**” Bernie shakes her head slowly, “Marcus, she was held captive in her own home...by a man she thought she loved at the time. Says she still loves. Did you know that? She hasn’t been round to see him since Cole’s been in hospital, but...she was going each day for a bit...just to sit with him.”

Marcus doesn’t flinch, doesn’t know how to react. His Charlotte was intelligent, driven, and the spitting image of her mother ever since she was small. She was his little girl. However, he never felt like he understood her. She wanted to go into the military, just like her mother, but when things came out about Bernie, she quickly changed her tune and did whatever her father wanted. He knew that it was selfish of him to expect no different of her. “Where is he?”

“Here. He could be dead for all I know now though.” Bernie can sense the wheels turning behind her ex-husband’s eyes. “Doesn’t matter. Things...aren’t what they used to be.”

“I can take care of this-”

“No, did you not just-” Bernie shakes her head a little, furrowing her brow, “He doesn’t matter. Charlotte and Cole matter.”

Marcus begins to shake his head, “She doesn’t want to see me.”

“Because you don’t seem to be taking an interest.” She glances down to the babe on her lap, finally just saying what was bothering her daughter, “She only wants you to be a grandfather...act like a grandfather.” Bernie adjusts the boy, lifting him up onto her chest more. She sighs softly, glancing up to Marcus finally, “Simple as that.”

Slowly folding his arms across his chest, “I...I never wanted it to be like this.” Marcus falls quiet,
staring straight ahead, at nothing in particular. “I always said, when the day came that one of the kids made me a grandfather, I’d...be so hands on. I’d be present for everything...and give them the world.”

“It isn’t too late to do any of that.” Bernie listens to her grandson’s soft snore in her ear, “In fact, I reckon Serena’s probably talking Char down from being so...cross. Not that it will get better overnight, but...give some thought to what I said. Make it up to her.”
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

During a session with her therapist, Charlotte shares her regrets in regards to her father and gives insight to her childhood.

Chapter Notes

Double chapters today!

There's no reasons.

I just had a nice day today. :D

“Well, I must say, you are looking much better than the last time we met.” Annette Vickers crosses her legs from her position in the comfortable, high backed chair. She eats from a cup of strawberry yogurt, having given her patient one as well. Some balked at her methods, but she would do whatever was necessary to keep her patients calmed and relaxed during their sessions. She grins toward her patient, “How is Cole doing?”

Charlotte begins to grin a little, “Cole is doing so much better.” She nods, “He’s being released today, actually. They’re going to wait to discharge until I’m finished up here so I can be with him. I’m...pretty excited actually.”

“Well, I must say, you are looking much better than the last time we met.” Annette Vickers crosses her legs from her position in the comfortable, high backed chair. She eats from a cup of strawberry yogurt, having given her patient one as well. Some balked at her methods, but she would do whatever was necessary to keep her patients calmed and relaxed during their sessions. She grins toward her patient, “How is Cole doing?”

“Seems so.” Vickers nods, “What about you? Besides being excited, how are you feeling?” When the young woman seems at a loss of words for how to answer, “Physically, emotionally, spiritually. Whatever way is easiest for you to tell me.”

Taking another bite of her yogurt, Char tilts her head to the side, “Physically, I’m fine...I think. Emotionally, I’m rocky at best.” She huffs a quick sound of amusement to herself. “You know, My Dad made a surprise visit the other night to the house. I had...agreed to go home and Mum stayed in hospital with Cole for the night.”

“Oh? How did that go?”

“Not well.” She gives a quick chuckle to herself this time, almost out of embarrassment, “I
overreacted, as I do when it comes to him anymore. Serena made certain I took my anxiety medication after yelling for him to leave.” Char licks her lips, shaking her head, “If it weren’t for her...I don’t know what I would have done. It’s like I don’t know myself anymore.”

“You don’t know yourself anymore in terms of your thought process or in terms of your reactions?” Vickers makes a mental note of the words her patient uses, glad she was recording the session as well. Charlotte Wolfe was an interesting case to her for many reasons and she often went back to listen to their sessions, wanting to dissect everything from the young patient’s lips. “What happened?”

“I yelled. I told him that he wasn’t Cole’s grandfather...among other things.” Char takes another bite of her yogurt, “Serena calmed me down and we watched a film in bed. I woke up once in the night, but...she never let go of me.” A soft smile begins to grow on her face, “Her arms just...protective, her face between my shoulder blades. I felt...safe. I felt safe for the first time in a long time.”

“Without your mother, you mean?”

“Yeah. Mum always...ever since I was little, I knew everything would be okay if she was there. Even though my Dad was the constant in the house, he was always really busy. Once Cam became a teenager, we usually fended for ourselves. Cold cut sandwiches, pizza, jam on bread...We were fine, but...” Char shakes her head a little, not believing she’s even saying this, “it was a big house and...I’d go from room to room when we arrived home after school and check each and every lock on each and every window and entry door.” Another spoonful of yogurt before she sets the empty container on the table, “I had watched a horror documentary with him about children being abducted and it absolutely terrified me at the time.” Charlotte leans back on the sofa, watching the woman across from her, “Mum would come home from being...wherever and I didn’t need to do that. I wouldn’t do it. I’d just...do my homework and...whatever. It was the farthest from my mind, then she’d be redeployed and...the behavior would start again.”

“Obsessive compulsive tendencies.” Vickers offers a soft smile, “they can display themselves in various ways. Most common are washing of hands or checking the knobs on the stove over and over. However, they can manifest in many different ways. It’s interesting that you experienced them as a child and were able to stop though, even if you didn’t realize you were doing so at the time.”

“I didn’t until Mum returned back from Kabul a few years ago...after the IED or whatever. I was twenty, finishing undergraduate classes, and dating Anders at the time, but it was before everything started with him and we weren’t really that serious then. I went out of my way to try and help her with whatever I could. I wanted to be just like her.” Char smirks to herself, “she was my hero. Still is, but my path...has completely changed direction from where I had planned for it to venture at the time.”
“Getting back to before, was it odd for you to feel safe with someone that wasn’t your mother?” Noticing her patient’s subtle nod, she continues, “Why?”

“I don’t know, honestly. It was...foreign. Not that I didn’t trust Serena previously, but...this was just something else. The feeling of trusting another person and feeling completely safe with another person are two different things often confused for one another, I think. For instance, I trust Cam. I know he’d be right there with a helping hand if I ever needed him to be and I know he’d willingly give his life for Cole. However, if it were up to him to break in on Boxing Day instead of Mum...I’d probably be dead. Flight overtakes fight every time with him.”

“He doesn’t like confrontation either?” Vickers finishes her own yogurt, placing it on her desktop behind her.

Charlotte shakes her head negatively, “I don’t like it, but I’d do it if I needed to. He just runs every time. I doubt he’s changed much. I’m actually surprised he’s stayed in one place for as long as he has currently.” She comfortably folds her arms, “Probably because of Cole, but...he doesn’t see him as often as I know he wishes he could. I’m just chuffed Cole has him as a positive male role model...a term I use very loosely.” It amuses her, thinking of her brother as a father figure of any sort, especially toward her own son.

“Your brother is a doctor and humanitarian when abroad. I’d say that’s positive enough for Cole, wouldn’t you?” Vickers smirks a little, “His efforts in Jamaica were quite spectacular...I’ve done a bit of homework.”

“He wasn’t here though. Just for Christmas while I was living with Anders and...he didn’t care.”

“I’m starting to...I’m starting to be able to piece together your hesitation with other people and they all go back to your time living with Anders...possibly even before that.” Vickers attempts to explain, “Quite understandably, you have abandonment issues. You sought the feeling of being...wanted, or desired, from whoever would give it to you. It was Anders once things came out that your mother willingly signed up for multiple tours, and away from you, to live true to herself.”

Charlotte pulls her legs up, tucking them underneath herself in an attempt to get more comfortable, “Makes sense.” Her voice soft, quiet. Almost lost to herself.

“I believe...and this is going to sound very odd, that you’re worried your wits or sanity may be abandoning you as well. Makes you scared, makes...your anxiety uncontrollable, makes you want to sit with Anders Hero while he rests on his deathbed. He’s familiar to you. Not necessarily in a positive way, but a tangible familiarity.” Noticing the tears starting to form in her patient’s eyes, she
leans over, gently touching the young woman’s knee to garner her attention, “And that’s perfectly fine.”

“Really?” Char swallows, worried with herself.

“Absolutely. Not to mention hormones probably aren’t helping anything at the moment either. Only making everything feel ten times worse. We like to call it the Baby Blues.” Vickers begins to smile a bit more, though she knows this is all a bit worse than that. “That’s what I’m here for. I’m here to help you navigate yourself through life. I’m here to help you discover the strategies to deal with your emotions in healthy and reasonable ways.”

“Is that what you do for Serena too?” Charlotte lifts her hand, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

“In the simplest of methods, yes. She and I have a bit of history together.” Vickers relaxes a bit more, “I’m trained in both psychology and psychiatry, which isn’t seen as often as it should be, but we are a rare breed. I think both behavioral and medicinal intervention are needed sometimes to work in tandem in order to better aid a patient. Sometimes people just need a little bit of medication for an anxious situation for a short amount of time, sometimes people have substantial trauma where more is required.” She nods, “it’s my job, as a doctor and scientist, to figure out the best methods for each of my patients. That’s why I don’t ever take on too many patients at one time. I like to keep my...patient circle small.”

“I thought about being a psychologist for a while. Fleeting thought, really.”

“Fleeting thought?” Vickers raises an eyebrow, “You’d be fantastic at it, honestly. However, you’re the only one who could possibly make those decisions...and you’ve plenty of time to make them. You’re brilliant, you’d be able to achieve whatever it is you decide to do...whenever you decide to do it.”

Charlotte blushes a little as she starts to smirk, quickly wiping her dampened cheeks, “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Vickers lifts a finger up, knowing the chime for the end of their session would begin to sound, grinning a bit when it does, as if on cue, “Now, you’ve a handsome little boy to get on home. Send me an email or text message? Let me know how everything has gone?”

Nodding a bit, Char stands from the sofa, clearing her throat as she composes herself a bit more, “Promise.” She lets herself out from the room quickly.
Annette Vickers nods slowly, cleaning up their cups of eaten yogurt and plastic spoons, disposing of them. Maybe the reason why she finds Charlotte Wolfe’s case so incredibly interesting is because the young woman reminds her so much of herself at that age. She knows that she’s living proof that life can get better, whether she’s comfortable with admitting that is another thing entirely though.
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

Charlotte apologizes for previous behavior.

Welcoming their grandson home from hospital, Bernie and Serena present him with a gift.

Charlotte carefully pulls the canvas loafers onto her son, “These nearly don’t fit, my little sausage.” When the boy takes hold of her face, she playfully nuzzles against his belly, causing him to give a hearty laugh. Pulling back, the young mother grins, glad to be hearing her son’s rhapsy chuckles again.

“Must say, someone sounds happy to finally be busting out.” Harry Lindstrom answers from the door, a smirk covering her face as she holds up a folder. “I have Mr. Wolfe’s discharge papers. One mother said something about needing to obtain something from her office and your other mother said she was going round to get the car. I was instructed to tell you both of those things.”

“Silver one office, blonde one car?” Char lets the boy climb into her lap as she notices the F1 nod, “Thought so.” She motions her closer, taking the pen as it’s offered to her, “Dr. Anand isn’t around today?”

“Unfortunately not. Family emergency, so here I am.” The young woman nods, turning the pages open to the ones that Charlotte needs to sign, “There are some medications that Dr. Anand has written in his care instructions that I have prescriptions for. Nothing too heavy, just some lower dosage antibiotics for when he gets home. Of course, if you notice any unusual tiredness, swelling, or odd behavior, come back immediately...though I imagine you would anyway.”

“I do hope it isn’t anything terribly serious with him.” Charlotte mumbles under her breath, giving the papers a quick once over before scribbling her signature, “Dr. Anand, I mean.” She hands the pen back to the young doctor, focusing on her six month old son, “However, I’m certain we’ll run into him again someday. Isn’t that right, Cole?” When she gains another belly laugh from him, she hugs onto him, feeling as he gives her a slobbery kiss on her cheek.

“I’ll leave you both to it, then. Usually we take patients out in a wheelchair, but that’d be a bit silly under the circumstances.” Harry is glad to see both parties happy for a change.
“Yeah.” Char pauses, “Hey, I um...wanted to apologize for when I yelled at you. I know it’s been a bit of time, but it was still unacceptable.”

“Oh, please. You were a worried mother with a sick son and I was telling you to get away from him. I’m glad that’s all I received.” The redhead gives a quick wink toward the pair before taking her leave.

“Ready, handsome?” When the boy holds onto her again, Charlotte carefully stands from the bed, carrying her son through the doorway. She comes face to face with Serena who is holding a small toy for the boy, “Couldn’t resist?”

“Of course not.” Serena isn’t able to keep the grin from her face, placing a reassuring hand on the young woman’s upper back as the boy takes hold of the squishy rubber giraffe, “I had it sanitized already. Actually put Donna on the case because I knew the thing would go immediately to his mouth.”

“Staff did mention, the other day, that he has some more teeth coming in.” Charlotte continues to walk alongside of the other woman to the elevators, “Thank you for waiting for me, by the way. I know you and Mum would have just chased pavement and left me by my lonesome to have your boy.”

“Never, the two of you are a package deal.” She absently rubs her hand over the young woman’s back, “Session went okay?”

Char gives a quick nod, “We’re working on some things.” She glances to her lively son, who is eagerly chewing on his new toy. She steps onto the elevator once the door opens and the occupants exit, her lips softly resting against her son’s hair. “I didn’t...” She pauses, smiling softly to herself, “I kept thinking the worst.”

“I know you did.” Serena nods a little, “but things can only go up from here.”

“Very true.” Char hums a chortle when Cole holds up his toy for her, “Did you thank Nan for that?” The boy turns to offer his toy to Serena, a broad smile on his face. “I do think he loves it.”

“I agree.” Serena guides them off the elevator once it opens on their floor. The ground floor. Same floor as the entrance for the staff. Things are easier this way. “Bernie is just out here.” She offers a quick nod to one of the younger staff members who wave to them excitedly. “I swear, they get
younger every year.” She mumbles to herself.

Charlotte doesn’t really know what she’s talking about, but notices her mother’s car at the end of the ambulance ramp. “Cole, where’s Gran?” The boy glances around, searching. Finally catching a glimpse of the woman, he holds his chubby fingers up, waving to her by flexing his fingers. “We’re going on home, my sweet boy.”

“Yes, we are.” Serena nods, something about all this feels...odd. The height before the fall on a roller coaster. Anticipation and not necessarily a positive one. However, she will never say anything about it. Why spoil such an important moment for them all? “Also, you were far too tired to notice it last night, but there’s another gift at home for this handsome boy. I do think he’ll enjoy it.”

“Oh?” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, smiling to her mother when she opens the car door for her.

Bernie hums her agreement, “Absolutely. Give our boy a bit more...freedom.”

“A walker.” Char stands upright after placing him in his seat, letting Serena buckle him in. When her mother rolls her eyes, moving back behind the driver’s side. “I’m right, aren’t I?” She appears hopeful for approval.

“You and Cameron. I don’t understand how you do that. You both would have made marvelous detectives.” Bernie shakes her head a bit, amused, “There can never be secrets in this family because the two of you won’t let anyone have them.” She sighs, ever so slightly disappointed. “Of course it’s a walker. However, we spent far too much on it. Did quite a bit of homework before the purchase as well.”

“I was thinking of getting him one myself, so that’s great. Thank you both. I really...” Charlotte feels herself starting to get a bit teary as she climbs in the passenger seat, knowing Serena would want to remain next to Cole in the back, “I honestly don’t know where I’d be without the two of you. Really. Cole and I are so incredibly-”

Bernie reaches over, gently touching her daughter’s forearm to stop the young woman from continuing her statement, “Serena and I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Bernie pulls back when she realizes her quick reaction to the young woman’s statement. She starts to focus on driving, her arm leaning on the rest between the seats. Bernie feels as Charlotte gently takes her hand. It causes her to smile ever so slightly, but she decides not to draw attention to it, instead squeezing the young woman’s hand gently with reassurance.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Ric treats a patient with ties to the Wolfes.
Serena calms Jason's worries.

Chapter Notes

29 weeks.
Someone's birthday is on Wednesday. You guys know what that means...
Irene's visual casting is Marthe Keller.

“Bed four. Female, mid to late-sixties. Signs of physical abuse prevalent. I believe she speaks
English, but is pretending she doesn’t. Definite ocular trauma...possible partial blindness. You’ll know that when you see it.” Harry Linstrom offers the folder to the clinical lead on duty within the AAU, “Mr. Griffin...it’s um...”

Ric nods a little, “Go on and take a breather. Then meet with me after you’ve given yourself a few minutes.” There was something about this F2 loan from Otter. She was bright and quick on her feet. Perfect material for AAU or even the ED. She reminds him of his daughter and Ric isn’t exactly certain why. He watches her walk off before turning his attention to the patient, curtain pulled around her as she had requested with hand movements. “Mrs. Hero, I’m Ric Griffin, AAU surgical consult. I understand you’ve had a bit of an...” It wasn’t entirely clear what finally brought her into the department, “Accident.”

Irene Hero stares at the man, maybe slightly younger than her, she thinks. She herself has deep set bright hazel colored eyes, billowing light brunette hair. It was obvious she attempted to fix her own appearance before she left the house. At least her hair and mascara on the eye that wasn’t punched repeatedly. Her cheek swollen, her jaw dislocated. Her eyebrows expertly filled in with a brow pencil. She’s been through this many times and it shows. Iris swallows, but mentions with a free hand that she can write. The other doctors and nurses never asked.

Raising his eyebrows, he realizes what she’s asking. “Okay, let me...” He pauses, “One moment.” He moves over to the side table drawer, grabbing a notebook and a pen from behind the desk that he sees. “Pens are a hot commodity around this place. Set it down for a moment and it disappears.” He rushes back over to the attractive woman, offering her both. “Better?”

Nodding a little, Irene takes the pen from him. Sorry. On purpose.

Ric studies her almost, a light trembling in her hand. He isn’t certain if it’s from a head trauma or her own nervousness. “Okay. Either way, Mrs. Hero-” He stops when the woman lifts her perfectly manicured hand. Bright red polish covering each nail, writing again after.

Irene.

“Okay then, Irene.” Ric smirks ever so slightly, “I’d like to get a CT for your head. Was there anywhere else you were...” He wants to say hit, but won’t for the sake of being polite. The patient motions to her side, “Okay. Full body it is then. Are you claustrophobic?” Noticing her head shake negatively, he continues, “Is there anyone we can phone for you? It’s never comfortable sitting in hospital alone, regardless of our efforts to make you feel otherwise.”

Irene thinks for a moment. 3 children. She shakes her head negatively to herself, her eyes growing
ever so slightly damp, Haven’t seen them in years. Told them to go. They did.

Ric’s gaze drifts up from the paper to the woman’s eyes. “I’m certain if they knew you were here—” He stops when the woman shakes her head negatively again. “Okay. I’ll...order the CT. On a scale of one to ten with one being no pain and ten being the worst pain imaginable, where would you say—” He’s stopped again by her gaze, knowing that regardless of how much pain his patient was actually in, she wasn’t going to admit it or answer his question. “Okay. I’ll be ordering you something to take an edge off as well.” He strolls back over to the nurses’ station, glancing to Donna, “Can you see if there’s any other information available for Mrs. Hero in bed four?”

Donna pops her head up more, glancing over to the pulled curtain. “Any other information on her besides a name?” She begins to type on the keyboard in front of her. “Hero is a pretty popular—” She pauses suddenly, reading something on the screen, “Did she mention any children?”

“Three. She said she doesn’t speak to them.” Ric can see something on the nurse’s face, “Is one of them a patient currently?”

Nodding a little, Donna sighs softly, “And you aren’t going to believe who they are.”

Serena pushes the door open to the AAU, Jason walking next to her, “I understand your worry that Bernie and I have been engaged for too long, but it isn’t too long for us. We’re comfortable. That’s all that matters.” She shakes her head.

“Do you not love one another enough to marry now?” Jason tilts his head to the side, following her into her office after she uses the keypad to open it. “Greta and I had Guinevere before we were married, but she probably won’t care that we married after her birth. She calls Bernie her Gran though when you and she aren’t actually married.”

“Yes, however, we also aren’t actually her grandparents, but we treat her as such, do we not?” Serena removes her jacket and scarf, hanging them on the coat rack next to the door. Not that she needed to wear either today, but it’s a habit really. “Same with Cole. A marriage between Berenice Wolfe and I is just for she and I to worry about. Which we are not worried about in the least.”

“What if something happens to you and hospital staff won’t let Bernie be with you because you aren’t married?”

Serena does her best not to roll her eyes, glancing up to meet his gaze, “Jason, that would not
happen. When people are engaged, there’s an agreement that an unconscious person would want their significant other by their side.”

“That wasn’t the case with Charlotte though.” Jason shakes his head, “She didn’t want Cole’s father near her-”

“She was able to make that decision on her own and asked us to keep him away from her at the time.” Serena glances over toward her nephew, gently placing a reassuring hand on his upper arm, “Calm down, this isn’t an issue for Bernie or myself...nor should it be one for you.”

Jason nods a little, feeling himself relax a bit. Though he would probably continue to feel a bit worried about it. “Greta wanted me to ask is Cole would mind skipping their playdate tomorrow. Guinevere hasn’t been feeling well and Greta is worried that it Cole may become sick from her.” He pauses, “She said his percentage of catching whatever Guinevere has is higher because of his stay in hospital.”

“She’s right.” Serena offers a soft, closed mouth smile. “I’ll let Charlotte know.” It wasn’t often that the young woman was truly alone with her son and it does concern Serena ever so slightly. She glances over when she sees Ric at the door, “I’ll be there in a moment.” Something in her friend’s eyes makes her know he’s more concerned than anything, it causes her to stand straighter. “What is it?”

“Something I don’t believe you’re going to like.” Ric sighs a little, turning away from her, knowing she’d be on his heels.
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Serena visits Bernie on Keller ward to deliver possible bad news.

Chapter Notes

Since the birthday of the lovely Catherine Russell falls on today (4/17), it means you guys get extra chapters for the event. Enjoy!

“Lunch delivery?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, smirking a bit from her position behind her desk on Keller ward. She was going over a few patient files and really just needed a few moments of quiet. “That’s a surprise.”

“Another surprise, it’s salad.” Serena chuckles a little when she notices her partner’s crinkled nose, but knows it’s only in teasing. “Chicken mango salad. Fresh from Charlotte’s imagination. She sent it with me this morning. Asked that I deliver to you.”

“I guess we’ll keep her.” She accepts a kiss from her partner when Serena leans over the desk. “We should do this more often. Our schedules conflict constantly anymore since they added me on as a regular consultant to Keller.” Bernie snarls her lip a little, watching as Serena pulls a free chair over to sit on the opposite side of the desk.

“Agreed, but I’m afraid my visit has other intentions as well.” Serena still opens the silicone lid of the glass container, seeing another much smaller glass container within it, containing dressing for the salad. She knows Bernie’s will be ever so slightly larger. Glancing over as her partner opens her salad, she sees that her hypothesis was correct and snorts amusement to herself. “It has to do with a patient.”

“Oh.” Bernie picks her head up, lifting an eyebrow, “Trauma case?”

“Yes and no.” Serena lets the room fall silent as she stabs her salad with her included fork. “Anders Hero’s mother is on my ward at the moment.”
Bernie’s eyebrows lower, furrow. “His parents are dead.”

“I reckon they are not.” She shakes her head a little, “Wouldn’t be the first time he’s lied to Charlotte.” Serena sighs softly, “She shows definite signs of abuse, that’s why she’s in my AAU. I’m not entirely certain how she arrived, but...she’s only able to write things down. CT showed mandibular and multiple cheekbone fractures. Another fracture seems a little old, but isn’t healing properly, so will probably require surgical intervention.”

“Her husband pummeled her face.” Bernie replies softly, almost as if it’s dawning on her, “Has he attempted to make contact?”

Serena shakes her head negatively again, “Not at all and she hasn’t mentioned him either. It’s almost as if she’s in for a regular procedure. Like it’s a mild, yet necessary, inconvenience...such as voting or a doctor’s visit. You go, then one goes on their way.” She leans back in the chair, “I’ve...been so rattled with how best to deal with this, that I even phoned Annette Vickers.”

“But not me.” Bernie glances back down toward her bowl of salad, which was actually quite tasty, and sets it onto her desk. “I should have been your first call, Serena.”

“I didn’t call you first because I wasn’t sure I wanted you to know at all. Annette was the one who told me that I had best speak with you.” Serena actually felt a bit guilty about that, “I didn’t know how you’d react...and I was worried.”

Swallowing, Bernie slowly folds her arms across her chest. It did upset her, she couldn’t deny that. However, she knows Serena’s been battling with her own demons as of late, though she’d never admit it. “How did you think I’d react?” Her eyes lift, meeting that of her partner across from her. “Expect me to be angry at this woman?” She shakes her head negatively, “I couldn’t possibly.”

“I don’t know.” Serena’s tone soft, honest. “I...I don’t want her to know about-” Her eyes glassy and she quickly inhales, “about our life. About Cole or the things done to Charlotte.” She swallows, setting the bowl onto the desk, placing her hands on either side of it, “My instincts tell me to protect them...shield them.” Serena shakes her head a little, “Protect our life.”

Bernie sighs quietly, leaning forward to take Serena’s hand, “No one will ever disrupt our life as it is now. No one.” She meets her partner’s eyes, “How can I help you?” She won’t finish that with your anxiety. It isn’t her place, she feels. “Besides saying you haven’t anything to worry about.”
“Am I being selfish?” Serena grips onto her partner’s hand.

“You’re being human.” A slight smirk plays at the corner of Bernie’s mouth, “That’s all. Wanting to protect one’s way of life is...natural.”

“Annette said I should put myself in this woman’s shoes.” Serena uses her free hand to stab her salad absently, “Whether I should even tell her that her son is sick...or tell her anything at all. I don’t know what...I don’t know what I want to do. I’d want to know if something happened to Elinor, but...I wouldn’t have sent her away in the first place.”

“Everyone has their reasons.” Bernie answers kindly, “How about I assist in theater since it’s a trauma situation? The two of us working together would be better, yes?” Noticing her partner’s subtle nod, “I can even take lead if you wish. Make things easier for you. I just need to let Sasha know. We’re...rather slow today as it is.”

The gesture actually calms Serena a bit, though it usually just made her think Bernie didn’t believe she could accomplish various aspects of her job, this is all different. She doesn’t want to be in charge of this. “Plastics consult should be on hand.”

“I’ll take a look at her scans. We may not even need Plastics.” This is one of those instances that her previous path in her career comes to her aid. She had seen many people affected not only by shrapnel, but car bombs and IEDs. This was, actually, something she was quite good at. “I’ll need your vascular expertise, of course.”

Serena nods a little, offering a flash of a smirk to her partner, “Okay.”
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Facing her own insecurities, Serena has a chat with Irene Hero.

Irene discovers one of her children is closer than she thought.

Serena continues reading through a patient file. Her patient brought into the secluded room of the AAU at her request. This wasn’t something she wanted many of her other staffers to know. They had already removed Irene Hero from the ventilator she was on for surgery and were just waiting her to become more aware of her surroundings.

Irene clears her throat, blinking slowly, but glad the room was relatively darkened. “Could...could I bother you for some water?” Her jaw feels wired to remain relatively closed, and this wasn’t the first time for that for her. She knows what to do. She speaks through her teeth, “I apologize, but I’m rather thirsty.”

“Oh, of course.” Serena sets her papers onto the over-bed table before she glances to the pitcher of water at the bedside, pouring some into the acrylic cup. “I’m going to raise the head of your bed a bit for you to drink.” She keeps her voice relatively calm and relaxed, even surprising herself, she pushes the button on the side rail, offering the woman a straw, getting the sense that this wasn’t her first time around the block with this injury.

Irene drinks a bit of the water from the cup using the straw offered before motioning for the woman to remove the acrylic cup from in front of her. “Thank you.” She says, giving herself a moment to come into her surroundings. “Surprised to see you here, doctor.”

“I was catching up on a bit of paperwork and wanted to keep a closer eye on you.” It wasn’t a lie, actually. She wanted to know where this woman was at all times. Serena offers a gentle, closed mouth smile. “How are you feeling?”

“My jaw is wired shut again.” Irene’s eyes seem sad, spent. She’s been through a great deal and the idea of all of it strikes Serena in her core. “I’m well, doctor. Thank you for asking.”

Nodding a little, Serena returns to her seat at the woman’s bedside. “There’s something I need to discuss with you...something that, if I were in your shoes, I would want to know.” She says honestly to herself. Most of the time spent at this particular patient’s bedside was attempting to weigh her...
options. However, the words of Annette Vickers continued to ring in her ear, *what if this happened to you.* It piques Irene’s interest and Serena continues, “I understand you informed staff that you did not want us to phone anyone to alert them of your arrival,” When she seems slightly alarmed, Serena raises her hand, “We didn’t. However, it has come to our attention that one of your children is a current, and long term, patient in one of our wards.”

“My children?” Her voice has a tinge of shame to it, something Irene hopes the doctor didn’t pick up on. “It has...been a long time. I doubt whichever it is would want to see me.”

“They...haven’t much time left.”

The room falls silent, Irene just staring ahead for a few moments, “Are you a mother, Ms. Campbell?” Irene’s voice breaks slightly.

Serena nods a little before vocally answering, “I am.”

“Tell me of your children?”

Swallowing, Serena bites her lips closed a moment, “I had a daughter.” She goes quiet again, “she died a couple years ago.”

Irene feels sorry she even asked in the first place, “Only the one?”

“Yes.” Folding her arms across her own chest protectively, Serena continues after a moment, “I’m close with my nephew and...my partner has two children that I’ve...grown fond of.” She swallows, “It’s um...” *Switch gears back to this woman.* “Do you want the information I have about your-”

“Which one of my children?” Irene can sense the pain in the doctor next to her, she can hear it in her voice.

Serena clears her own throat, “Your son, Anders.” She nods, “He’s upstairs. Sixth floor. We call that the Darwin unit.” She leans back in her chair a bit more, “He’s had multiple issues, none of which I’m able to discuss with you, but they’ve had him in that unit for...nearly eight months now.” *Tell her everything.* “If you so choose, I can have a porter take you up for a visit.”
“How much longer does he have?”

“I don’t know. I apologize.” Serena begins to gather her things together, “I should um...I’d better get back to my desk. I’ll have a nurse come to take your vital signs in a moment.” She tries to busy herself.

“Ms. Campbell.” When the doctor glances back to her, Irene offers her the slight smile she’s able to display, “Thank you for...telling me.”

“I’d want someone to do the same for me.” Serena answers softly, not able to fully meet the woman’s eyes. She may have just ruined what family she’s been able to cobble together. She feels the desire to run to Cole. A desire to hide it. Hide her family and her life as it is now. Leaving the room, Serena feels her chin begin to tremble, immediately going to her office so that no one can see her break down.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

With Anders Hero on his death bed, he receives an unexpected visitor. Charlotte does her best to keep the situation calm with her intentions are called to question.

Chapter Notes

3 days after the last chapter.

Translations at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Charlotte gently strokes Anders’ hair back with her nails, Most of which had grown back due to his refusal of chemotherapy after starting it months prior. A bit more awake and alert than usual. “Cole’s doing better. Much better, actually.” She smirks slightly, “he’s such a ham.”

“I’m glad to hear it. It was odd not seeing you for a few days.” It was two weeks. Anders complete incomprehension of time wasn’t anything new. “I missed you.”

“I know.” Char glances over toward him, remembering what her therapist said about his entire existence being one of the things that causes her such anxiety. She doesn’t know if she actually missed him at the time. He never crossed her mind really. Did that make her a bad person? She doesn’t know. “Your beard is coming back.” She moves her hand to his jaw, “Is that okay? I can speak to the nurses if you’d rather it shaven off.”

“We’ll see what happens to it.” Anders huffs a soft chuckle, slowly edging himself over to the side of the bed his ankle is shackled to. They do this. However, he’s not usually this aware and she’s usually just holding him as a mother-figure would. “I’ve been thinking of my end of life plans.”

It causes her to freeze after standing, “We don’t need to-”

“How long have you been thinking?”

“Nothing drastic. Just...few little things.” Seeing her worried face, Anders shakes his head a little, adjusting himself in the bed. “Forget it. It’s fine. Just...to simplify, I’d like to be cremated. No
ceremony. I have an address that I want you to send the remains to—"

“I...” Char shakes her head slowly, a bitter chuckle to herself, “I’m not allowed to keep your remains?”

He didn’t expect that actually. Anders opens his mouth to respond and finds it hard to formulate the words, so then shuts his mouth after a moment, leaning his head back. He does his best to tighten his jaw, “What...whatever you want.” His voice slurred, slow.

Charlotte knows it’s just something that happens often with his health decline. “Where is the address to?” She folds her arms across her chest, knowing it’s going to take him a bit to think about it before being able to put his thoughts to words. When he turns his head away from her, she knows she isn’t going to get an answer out of him. “I wanted your son to have you, honestly. If you’d rather—”

“So...Ssss...” Anders pauses, taking a deep breath even though this all was quite frustrating to him, “Soli...Solicitor has.”

She nods a little, “I’ll speak with him.” Charlotte takes a seat again, motioning him over a bit and finally climbing into the small hospital bed with the man. She sees his tears starting to form. “Everything is fine. Everything will be sorted.” Her nails begin to gently rake through his hair, knowing it was something that helped him relax, “Calm yourself, love.”

The door opens, unexpectedly, and instead of a hospital staffer stepping through, there’s an older woman, bruised face. Irene Hero. She stares down toward her son in the bed. Tears almost instantly go to her eyes, but she doesn’t move closer to him. She speaks only in Greek, “εσύ είσαι.”

Charlotte glances up toward the woman, clad in a hospital gown. The eyes. Those eyes she so hoped her son would inherit. She swallows, “Don’t be offended if he doesn’t answer. He’s having...a moment.” She doesn’t go into what she means by that. She doesn’t need to. “Are you Anders—”

“Achilles is my son.” Irene answers through her closed teeth. They didn’t want her speaking much after the surgery. “You are?”

“Completely confused.” Char shakes her head a little, glancing down to the man in her arms, who is comfortably leaning against her. “Achilles?”

“Old...old me.” Anders manages to get out, staring toward his mother. He doesn’t try to speak Greek back to her just yet, but doesn’t seem the least bit surprised by the bruises on her face. He doesn’t
like it, but it isn’t abnormal for either of them.

“Well...isn’t this a surprise.” Charlotte smiles a little, “I’m glad to see you’re...” Not dead? What could she possibly say that wouldn’t make her sound like she was crazy, “I’m sorry to see you’re poorly.” It sounds weird, she was right, that sounds very weird. “Andy has only spoken of you in passing.”

Irene nods a little, “For all intents and purposes, I was dead to him.” She answers quietly. “It’s been...twenty-two years since we’ve seen one another.” She doesn’t take her eyes off of her son in the bed. “The...the staff informed me of his presence here not terribly long ago.”

“Oh?” Char begins to sit up a bit more, feeling Anders gripping onto her free hand. She feels him pull her a bit closer. Out of instinct, Charlotte hushes him quietly in an attempt to calm the older man. She notices the woman take a seat next to the bed in the seat previously occupied by herself. “It’s, honestly, really nice to finally meet you.”

“είναι νέα, Achilles.” Irene watches the pair. “Are you and Achilles together?”

Charlotte swallows, glancing over to the man. She flashes a quick smirk to the man, “He’s my husband.” It’s what they had to tell the police guard at the door in order for her to enter. It’s what he had been telling staffers. Honestly, he thought they were. At the mention of the word, a part of Charlotte ached, a painful ache. She turns her attention back to the woman. “I’m sorry, I don’t really know...anything about you other than the stories Anders’ has told me of his childhood.”

“You are too young for him.” Irene answers honestly, but she isn’t upset or necessarily accusing Charlotte of anything.

“I was...bad to her.” Anders manages to croak, holding Charlotte’s hand a bit more protectively. “I hurt...hurt her. L...like Papa and you.” His words slurred, his eyes tired. He knows Char doesn’t like to think about those times, or that she doesn’t think he remembers, but he does.

Char glances away from him, surprised he remembers and ashamed of herself at the same time. She allows him to still hold onto her though she wishes she could just walk out. That’s what she wants most...to just run away from this situation right now. “We’ve...grown from who we used to be.” She answers for him, tears in her own eyes. That put it mildly. She is downplaying this and she isn’t certain why. She can feel the older woman’s eyes still on her, “Andy speaks fondly of you...and his sisters. Two of them, right?”
Irene glances toward the ground, tears in her own eyes. She stands suddenly, speaking to herself quietly, “Αυτό ήταν λάθος.” She shakes her head, moving toward the door, “Πρέπει να φύγω. Λυπάμαι.”

“Mama.” Anders watches the woman, seeing her pause in the doorway, “Σε αγαπώ.”

She wants to say it back. She wants to run and hold her son in her arms, but he’s hardly the young man she last spoke to. He is a man now. A man with a life and a wife. Irene couldn’t, “ίδιο.”

Charlotte doesn’t know what to make of the whole exchange. She glances down to Anders, who has tears in his own eyes, but is starting to fall asleep against her when one finally escapes his lid. “Everything will be fine.” She tells him quietly, returning to their now uncomfortable closeness. She wants to scream.

Chapter End Notes

εσύ είσαι = it is you
είναι νέα = she is young
Αυτό ήταν λάθος = this was wrong
Πρέπει να φύγω. Λυπάμαι. = I must go. I’m sorry.
Σε αγαπώ. = I love you.
ίδιο. = Same
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Charlotte demands answers.

Though Bernie defends her, Serena thinks Charlotte's anger is founded.

Serena doubts her place.

Charlotte sits in the lounge, watching her son scoot back and forth in his walker. “You know, Cole, that’s designed to help you learn to walk. Not for you just to use a single foot and to go careening from one side of the room to the other.” She doesn’t expect a response from the boy, but smirks to herself, amused by her son. A thin laptop rests on top of her thighs as she types, legs folded like a pretzel. Soft music plays in the background, gentle classical.

Pushing the door open, a sense of guilt present in the back of Serena’s mind. She had been hoping the young woman would be up in bed at this hour. It wasn’t terribly late, but she sometimes would put the baby down to have some personal time. She shouldn’t face her, or possibly couldn’t. When she feels Bernie’s hand take her’s, it relaxes her quite a bit.

“Who is that, Cole?” Char asks the babe as he excitedly begins to clap and scoot over toward the doorway, leading to the foyer, “go get ‘em.”

Serena crouches, lifting the boy into her arms once they’re happily welcomed home. “Hello, my love. Did you have a nice day with Mum?” When the boy babbles to her, she acts as if she understands every word.

Bernie grins toward them, kissing the palm of the infant’s hand when he extends it toward her over his Nan’s shoulder to her. “Of course he had a good day.”

Charlotte slowly closes the laptop, folding her hands over her lap as she watches the adoration between her son and his grandparents. “Can I talk to you both for a moment?” She rubs her hands together, attempting to muster her own courage to speak about the situation.

“Is this something that can wait until tomorrow? I’d much prefer to take a long, hot bath with a glass of shiraz at the moment, if it’s all the same to you. Today was...harrowing.” Serena answers for herself, still letting Cole cuddle against her.
Bernie steps forward a bit more, “Well, I can speak with you if it’s something important, but—”

“I know that one of you told Anders’ mother that he was on Darwin.” Charlotte says, maintaining a light tone while Cole is present. The disappointment hidden behind her smile and maintained in her eyes apparent, but she keeps it from her voice. “Who was it?”

“It was me.” They answer in unison.

Bernie shakes her head, “It was me. So, if you’re going to shout, go ahead.” She motions for Serena to head upstairs, “Go on, Campbell. Hot bath and shiraz. I’ll bring your glass up once you get in.”

“Look,” Char says a little more forcefully, garnering their attentions before relaxing her voice to how it was previously, “Know that I’m not happy that you didn’t inform or ask me first. I’d have much rather felt her out before taking her up.” She pauses, glancing between them, “I understand wanting her to be able to see her son before he finally dies, but…” She shrugs, “that wasn’t your job. You broke patient confidentiality. Which, I’m certain, is an offense that would garner one to be documented. Would it not?” Char stands, walking around the coffee table, placing her hands casually on her hips, “Why say anything?”

“She’s his mother. His next of kin. She has a right to be informed.” Bernie stands no more than a meter from her daughter, their eyes fixed.

“Her face looked like she was in a back alley brawl. You all did a magnificent job stitching her back together.” Charlotte raises her eyebrows, “Anders, whose real name is Achilles by the way, spoke fondly of his family when he was a boy. However, he said they were dead. Turns out, it’s been over twenty years since he’s spoken to any one of them. I’m curious as to why, aren’t you?” She reaches her hands out toward Cole, who leans toward her to be held on her hip.

“Apples don’t fall far from the tree.” Bernie watches as the boy places his head on his mother’s shoulder.

“No, you’re quite right. I’m sure Cole will start beating us at any point now.” She absently rubs the boy’s back with her nails, “Thing is, I’m not even angry really. I’m just disappointed. I could never be angry with you, Serena.” She gives a sad smile though the woman looks away, her focus turning back toward her mother, “Mum, you’ve a bad poker face.” She pases them, beginning to ascend the stairs herself, “I’m going to feed him and get him put down. Spaghetti is in the fridge. Help yourselves.”
“You didn’t need to do that.” Serena says quietly once the younger woman is out of view, removing her scarf and jacket, hanging them on the coat hook by the front door.

“Yes, I did.” Bernie sighs, following suit. She follows her partner to the kitchen, “her anger is unnecessary.”

“No, it isn’t.” Moving to the wine cabinet, Serena removes a bottle as well as a glass, quickly opening the shiraz and pouring some into said glass. “It’s completely founded.”

“I do wish you would have told me that you were going to tell Mrs. Hero.” Bernie leans against the kitchen island, “However, other than that, I probably would have done the same thing. A mother should know when their child is sick or injured...or dying.” Her voice drops off a bit. “In case she started full on, I stepped in. You don’t need to take that, I do.”

“I can take a lot more than you give me credit for, Berenice.” Serena brings the glass to her lips, taking a sip. “I was wrong. She’s completely correct. I made the wrong decision. I compromised doctor-patient confidentiality. I compromised her trust.” She shakes her head a little, taking another sip, “I was on the fence about whether or not to say anything in the first place and...I was wrong.” Her voice begins to waver.

“If you didn’t say anything, I would have.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.” Serena shakes her head, “No, you’re far smarter than I am when it comes to those things. I think with my heart before my head...I do it often nowadays. I do it too much.” Another sip, “Anders Hero doesn’t deserve anything, but...I don’t know what his mother has experienced. Her husband...we don’t even know, for sure, if he was the one to do all of that, we just assumed. She never said a word. Never implicated anyone.”

Bernie sighs softly, “Serena-”

“She’s been there before for similar injuries. Who is to say it wasn’t one of her other children to do that to her? What if she fights for visitation of Cole when that bastard finally dies? A single hair out of place and...I don’t know what I’d do.” Serena shakes her head, another sip.

“Calm down.” Bernie moves closer behind her.
“Elinor would have never been in that position because she’s already dead.” Serena places the glass on the counter, “and your children, try as I might, are not my children. I have no right to...to treat them as—”

“Hey, come here.” Carefully turning the woman away from the counter, Bernie envelops her in an embrace, hearing and feeling as she breaks down. “No harm done, Campbell.” Her partner wracked with sobs suddenly, Bernie isn’t entirely certain how she could possibly make her feel better. “Charlotte calls you and I her parents. Rarely Marcus. She does that for a reason, not because I or anyone else told her to do so. She thinks the world of you. You know that, Serena.”

“I’m not though, Bernie. My daughter died. Your daughter didn’t think anything of me.” Serena’s voice quiet, obviously wracked with emotion. “I’m an awful person for getting the two of those things...for imposing my emotions toward my Elinor onto Charlotte...because Charlotte will never be Elinor.” Slowly backing away from her fiance, “If you’ll excuse me...I think I just need to be alone for a bit.”

“Serena, don’t seclude yourself, please.” Bernie tries, her voice quiet, tender. She reaches for her partner’s hand, only to have her walk around quickly. Bernie stands there alone for a moment, glancing over to the remaining wine left in the glass on the counter top. Lifting it with the stem between her fingers, she finishes it off. She’ll take the sofa tonight.
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

Charlotte decides to inform Irene about her family.

Chapter Notes

Nearly a week after the previous chapter.

Happy Easter, everyone!

Charlotte makes her way into the AAU, smiling toward Xavier Duval standing at the desk. “Dr. Duval, such a joy seeing you again.” She chuckles a little to herself at the, unusually, mellow AAU.

“Ms. Wolfe, please, it’s Xav. Ms. Campbell isn’t in today, unfortunately.” Xav pauses, remembering they all lived together, “Which, I’m sure, you know.” He glances around the area, “Mr. Griffin is in theater, currently. Laparotomy, so I’m trying to keep things stable on the home front.”

“Seems you’re doing a magnificent job.” She nods, folding her arms across her chest, “Actually, I’m not here to see him either.”

“No?”

Charlotte shakes her head, “No, is there a patient still here by the name of Irene Hero?” Char wears a comfortable yellow sweatshirt, as well as a pair of skinny jeans, folded up a couple times at the ankle. It isn’t that they’re too long, but strictly a fashion choice. White plimsolls cover her feet without socks underneath. She’s comfortable, and therefore confident in her surroundings.

Xav raises an eyebrow, not really knowing or understanding why she’d be aware of this patient. He motions toward the secluded room, ordered so by Ms. Campbell herself. “She hasn’t had any visitors...nor has she requested we phone anyone. It’s...” He doesn’t want to say abuse around Charlotte Wolfe. Never wants to potentially remind her of their first meeting.

She reaches a hand up, giving his muscular shoulder a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay, Xav.” Charlotte
lets him go, walking in the direction of his point. Pausing just outside the door, she takes a deep breath, pushing it open finally.

Irene Hero rests with a nasal cannula on her face, various intravenous lines in her arm. A bit worse off than the day prior. Her eyes remain closed, not hearing the opening of her own door, or grown not as sensitive to it. It’s been days since she’s worried about anything. It’s been wonderful.

Charlotte moves to the foot of the bed, removing the file that sits there. She knows this terminology. That wasn’t lost on her as much as her parents thought.

The woman in the bed hears the gentle commotion, but decides not to be too obvious. Irene watches the young woman for a moment. Achilles’ girl checks the files, she looks at her monitors and levels. “So you’re a doctor now?”

Huffing a soft chuckle, Char returns the metal clipboard back to its place at the end of the bed. “No, fortunately. Though, my parents would love it if I were.” She places her hands on her hips, glancing toward the woman. “I reckon we got off on the wrong foot at our first meeting and...I wanted to properly introduce myself.”

“Does Achilles know you’re here?” Irene watches her intently. She isn’t angry, far from it. Mostly intrigued.

“Does he need to?” Charlotte shrugs a little, “He’s pretty out of it today, so I wasn’t sticking around.” She sighs, taking a seat near the bed. She knows Serena probably didn’t go into detail about his ailment. “He has brain cancer...that’s slowly been spreading to his spinal cord, as well as an unrelated, but equally serious heart condition.”

Irene adjusts her position in the bed, looking at the young woman better, “There was a guard at his door.”

“Yes.” She nods.

“Why?”

Licking her lips, Charlotte takes a moment before responding, “There was an incident this last Boxing Day that involved him, my stepmother, and myself. I’ve been staying with my parents for a
bit over a year now because...because of his actions.” Her tone honest, “I needed to feel safe.”

“Why weren’t you staying with him?” There’s so much Irene wishes to know of her son, but knows she could never actually ask him and receive an honest answer.

“We weren’t compatible.” Char nods slowly, a part of her feeling as if she needed to protect the man, “I wanted to return to university and we...disagreed.” This is all causing her to be a bit less confident than she originally was. Her foot begins to bounce against the tiled floor, an exit point for her anxious energy. “I was brought here, to this very room and probably the bed you’re currently resting in now...and my stepmother saw to my protection...from him.”

“It’s the plight of being a Hero wife.” Irene answers quietly, “we marry them, all of them, warts and all.”

“That’s...that isn’t true. You’re far more important than that just to render yourself as just a Hero wife. You’re important to Andy...I’m sure you’re important to your daughters-”

“It’s been years, girl.” Irene shakes her head, “Probably longer than you’ve been alive-”

“I’m twenty-three.” Charlotte folds her arms across her chest, feeling small. “It doesn’t matter though. None of...” She inhales deeply, the woman was frustrating to say the least, “I came here to tell you that Anders and I have a child together. His name is Cole. He’s seven months old...and he’s absolutely perfect in every way.” Her eyes glassy as she watches this woman, “I want to help you.”

“I don’t need help.” She continues to stare at her son’s wife. “Especially not from you.”

“Then you’re going to go back home and your husband will literally kill you.” Char stands, letting the room go silent for a moment, “my son will break the cycle. My son is not a Hero, but he’s my hero. He’s the reason I wake every morning, he’s the one that makes my heart beat.” She swallows, “I’d have liked for him to have a positive figure from his father’s side since Andy isn’t going to be around, but...he’s fine without it too. We’ll make do.”

Irene swallows, watching the young woman, “Do you...” She doesn’t know what to feel at this point. “Do you have a photograph I can see of the boy?”

“Cole.” Charlotte says again, removing her mobile from her pocket to pull up the device’s gallery.
She offers it to the older woman, watching as Irene’s tears increase. “Cole Berenike Wolfe. He’s...he’s named after my mother.”

“Berenike was also my pappoú’s name.” Irene pauses, lifting her IV covered hand to carefully wipe an escaped tear from her eye, “My...my grandfather.” She stares at the picture of the brunette haired boy, his large brown eyes causing her to smile. “You’ve stayed true to his heritage.”

“It’s his heritage.” Char shrugs, “You can’t cover it up or slap it with a coat of paint, it’s still his history. He’ll know all about where he comes from...especially if you’re there to help him with it.” She watches as the woman slowly glances up to her.

“Why are you being so kind?” Irene asks quietly, returning her gaze to the mobile screen.

“Because you could have been my future.” Charlotte answers quietly, “where you are now...had my stepmother not taken me in when she did, I could have been-” She pauses, shaking her head a little, “it’s never too late though. It’s never too late to get out.”

Irene listens intently to the young woman, she was completely correct. However, it has been so long since seeing Achilles, or her daughters, what difference could his child bride make? Cole Berenike, a Greek name. Perhaps this child bride could be trusted after all.
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

After Serena shares her insecurities, Charlotte reaffirms her place in their family.

Making her way up the stairs after arriving home and removing her jacket and plimsolls, Charlotte hears the television playing from inside her parents’ room. She knew her mother was in Keller ward, after sending her a text message early that morning. However, that meant Serena was home. Gently pushing open the door to the bedroom, she sees the woman asleep for a midday nap, empty wine glass on the bedside table. She gently crawls into bed, wrapping herself against Serena’s side, her arms securely around the woman.

Serena opens her eyes a little, feeling the sudden hold. She’s depressed. She knows she is. Her night was filled with tears and most of her day filled with shiraz. “What do you want?” Her tone ever softened from all the wine she’s consumed. It never does her any favors. “You’ve already sent Cole away for the day. I’m not family. I understand.”

“Because Mum said to leave you alone and I thought you needed a day just for you.” Charlotte answers honestly, not letting go of the woman. “So Cole’s spending the day with his second favorite uncle, of course I mean Cam...Jason’s his most favorite.” It usually makes the other woman laugh, but the room remains quiet.

“Not having him here makes me think too much.” Serena isn’t usually this open about her emotions, but knows Charlotte can be trusted. Her eyes glassy, “I...said an awful thing last night and I’ve...I feel absolutely horrible about it.”

“Whatever you said, I forgive you.” Char knows the comment must have been about her since she’s garnering this response from the woman. “Life is far too short to hold take-it-to-the-grave grudges, Stepmum.”

“I sometimes think...I’m closer to you than I ever was to Elinor.” Serena’s eyes fill with tears a bit more, a mixture of her raw emotions and the shiraz she’s been consuming all day long, “and I shouldn’t be. Elinor was my daughter...my only daughter. My flesh and blood. She looked just like I did when I was her age. Just like you look like your mother.”

Of course Charlotte is going to let the woman vent, she’d never stop her, but she can tell there’s a bit more here than just that. “She had your cleft chin and all.”
“You’re perfect, Bernie is perfect, Elinor was perfect, and I’m...” Serena shakes her head, not able to explain herself enough to continue.

“I am far from perfect. I have Mum’s pointy nose and thin lips. I wouldn’t change them for anything now, maybe a bit of Kylie Jenner plumping, but I thought about it constantly in my younger years. Mostly with all the comments about how much I looked like her. Not to mention just how...mentally unbalanced I can be.” Char shrugs, “It is what it is. Knowing how these genes go, I’m sure Cole will inherit something other than these eyes.”

“I’ve...been having a tough time these past few days.” She wouldn’t readily admit that to many people. Usually adopting a never let them see you sweat mentality.

“Is there a reason? I mean...not that there absolutely needs to be one, but...” Charlotte pauses, “Wait, does this have anything to do with Anders’ mother?” When she’s met with silence, it just affirms her suspicions, “Why are you worried about that?”

Serena swallows, still staring forward, “He has plenty of family and I’m not-”

“You are though.” Char laughs a little to herself, sitting up a bit to look to the woman’s face, “Yesterday, when I came home, I did a bit of the laundry. Including some of your things, Mum’s things.” She tilts her head to the side, “Cole was in his walker and managed to get ahold of one of your camisoles before I threw it in...one of your cotton black ones that you have in abundance.” It garners Serena to turn her attention to the young woman, “He wouldn’t let it go, just kept rubbing it against his cheek. He wasn’t doing it because it’s particularly soft, but because it smelled of you.” She pauses, watching the woman still. “I needed to wait until he went down for his nap to nick it from his tiny little fingers.”

Looking away again, at nothing in particular, Serena begins to break down. Closing her eyes when she feels the young woman’s arms around her again.

“There’s never a day that goes by that I’m not thankful you’re in our lives.” Charlotte tells her honestly, just holding her closely. “We aren’t tanks or machines. We’re humans. We have lives. We have feelings.” She adjusts her position on the bed, still holding the woman, “We’re allowed to have those feelings.” Char feels her shirt start to dampen with the woman’s tears.

“Cole will forget about me when he has his real Nan.” Serena says softly, her voice breaking. She’s starting to fall asleep, though her tears continue to trickle down her face.
“You are his real Nan. You’re his only Nan. You’re always going to be his Nan, Serena. If she even wants a part, she can be something else. You’re Nan though.” Char smirks a little to herself, knowing it’s just the wine talking at this point for the woman. Though, it is said alcohol brings out the truth for people. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying right here with you.” This is odd to her. Since coming to live with Serena Campbell, this woman has been a rock for her, a sounding board. They’ve been through a great deal together, but something tells Charlotte that there’s still plenty for the two of them to experience.
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

Unable to reach his stepmother and sister, Cameron takes his nephew to his Gran.

Keller ward sees Bernie Wolfe's soft side.

Chapter Notes

Same day as the last chapter.

Cameron carries his nephew in his arm, supply bag slung on his opposite shoulder. “Listen, mate, you’re going to either lose the weight, or learn to walk. This is getting a bit silly.” He walks through the halls toward the Keller ward floor within Holby City Hospital.

“Oh, look how big he’s getting.” Sasha Levy stands just outside the elevators, touching the screen of his mobile and putting it back in his pocket just as the young man is about to pass. “Are you on babysitting duty today?” He walks alongside the pair.

“Something like that. Mum with you today or is she on AAU helping out?” A sense of worry hitches Cameron’s voice, “I haven’t been able to get ahold of her.”

“Oh, she’s up here. Mr. Hanssen is on AAU...which, I’m certain Ric is loving.” Sasha smirks, opening the door to the actual ward. “Bernie has been alone for the past few hours while I’ve been at a conference. She’s probably been a bit busy in theater...you know how she is.”

Cam nods, walking through. Things are quiet. Much quieter than they are on Darwin, that’s for sure. He spots Dom Copeland excitedly walking toward him, “Mum around?”

“Office.” Dom holds his hands out, taking Cole into his arms as the other man walks off. “We need to convince Uncle Lofty to let us get you a playmate.” He watches as Cam pushes his way into the office, glancing over to Sasha, “Everything okay? He seems...stressed.” Pause, “More stressed than usual.”
“No idea.” Sasha shakes his head slowly, focusing on the doorway to the office for a moment.

“What do you mean they’re unreachable?” Bernie shakes her head, slowly closing a file she was going through. “You’ve tried phoning?”

“Darling Charlotte is neither answering my text messages or phone calls. I tried Serena, since Char said she was off work today, and she’s just as unattainable.” Cam shakes his head, “I mean, Cole’s totally fine. We went to the park.” I received many phone numbers from beautiful women. “Did a bit of shopping. So...yeah. He’s just running out of nappies and I have no idea what size that beast takes.”

Bernie watches her son for a moment without saying anything, “It’s okay to say that you’re worried, Cameron.” The young man looks away. “I was in theater. I had no idea Cole was going to be with you today. I only told Charlotte to leave Serena alone.”

“What’s wrong with Serena?”

Shaking her head, she replies, “Stress.” Bernie feels it isn’t her place to tell Cameron about Irene Hero or anything that’s been bothering her fiance lately. “She’ll be fine, I’m sure. Just needs a warm bath, glass of shiraz, and a bit of Netflix or something. She just needs to clear her head.”

Cam nods slowly, “How much longer are you here for?”

Checking her wristwatch, “I can head out now. I finished my electives for the day and even did a couple that were on a waiting list. So...we’re ahead of schedule. Let Sasha take a few.” Bernie nods, watching as the baby’s supply bag is dropped on top of her file.

“I need to go. I’ve a da-” He pauses, “I’ve business to attend to. Dom Copeland has him. I’m sure he’s showing Cole off to Ange Godard.” Cam smirks a little, “I’ve...had enough for today. He’s absolutely everywhere with this crawling business.”

“Crawling?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, a surprised expression seeping across her face as she stands, “He crawled for you?”

Slowly placing his hands on his hips, Cam grins a bit more, “Of course he did...for Uncle Cam.” He starts to walk toward the door of the office, letting himself out.
“Okay.” Bernie says to herself, taking a peek into the baby supply bag. Of course, unsurprising for Cameron, things seem tossed about. As if he tried looking for things or things fell out from within. She steps around, her desk, pulling her light pink jacket on from the hatrack near the door. She pulls her handbag over her head, using the cross body aspect to it, while pulling the supply bag onto her shoulder. Opening the door, she notices Dom standing at the nurses’ station with her grandson in his arms. “Practicing?”

Dom grins, amused by the baby’s excitement over seeing his grandmother. “Please, pass along to Charlotte that Lofty and I would be more than honored to sit for her anytime. He is proper adorable.” Dom offers the boy to his grandmother finally, watching as Cole nuzzles his face against her cheek in his own sort of kiss.

“Okay, Cole.” Bernie chuckles at the boy, “I missed you too. Those eighteen hours since we last saw one another were far too many.” She rubs his back a little, picking her head up again to notice the staffers watching her break her usual Army veteran exterior. “Don’t you all have something you should be doing?”

“And miss this? Not a chance.” Ange smirks, folding her arms. “The stoic Army medic has a soft side, who would have thought?” Since her arrival with her new unit, she and Bernie Wolfe were often on the same page, thankfully. Only a handful of times where they didn’t agree so far.

“We’re heading out. Need to get this boy back to his mother.” Bernie walks past the group, an underlying worry behind her eye, though she doesn’t mention it and even does her hardest to hide it. She pushes through the doors, making her way toward the elevators.

The car ride home was relatively uneventful, with exception to Cole’s babbling from the back seat of the sports car. Bernie’s worries increases as she drives down the residential neighborhood, spotting her fiance’s car, signifying that she was home. “Why isn’t she answering?” She asks quietly to herself, equally unsure of her daughter.

Parking in the driveway, Bernie collects everything from the car, including the now tired baby. “Let’s go check on Nan and Mum, eh?” Walking up the pathway, she uses her keys in the door, gently pushing it open. Met with a relatively silent house. Carefully checking each room on the ground floor, she then starts climbing the stairs. “So crawling.” Bernie mumbles to her grandson, “about time, lazybones.” Noticing her bedroom door ever so slightly ajar, she pushes it open the rest of the way.

Exasperating a sigh of relief, she spots Serena curled into her daughter’s embrace, as well as the empty bottle of shiraz on the bedside table. She slowly closes the door again, “Okay.” Bernie makes
her way to descend the stairs again, “You’re going to show me that new trick of yours then. Our secret.”
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Charlotte informs her mother of the best way to make Serena feel better.

Serena admits she was wrong.

Chapter Notes

Charlotte reaches the bottom of the staircase, only to see her son sitting there, clapping his chubby little hands. “Oh...how did you get here, my sweet boy?” With that, he excitedly crawls away and she pauses, wondering if she just saw what she believes she saw. Racing to follow him, she glances into the lounge, where her mother relaxes on the sofa, the baby laughing as he crawls under her propped up feet.

“Did you have a nice rest?” Bernie lifts her head, an amused smirk toward her daughter. She’s comfortable, plate of cut up melon next to her that she occasionally gives her grandson. “I’m glad you two have...made up.”

“We weren’t fighting.” Char shakes her head, folding her arms. She stands there for a moment,
watching her son crawl about, “We’re going to need to buy baby gates for the doorways. He’s fast.”

“I’ve noticed.” Nodding slowly, Bernie continues to watch her daughter.

Charlotte makes her way to the sofa, sitting at the other end of the piece of furniture. She reaches over, taking a piece of melon from the plate. “She feels that my discussions with Anders’ mother may diminish her importance with Cole.” She shakes her head a little, “Which simply isn’t true. Cole thinks the world of the two of you and nothing is ever going to change that. You’re both his grandparents.”

Bernie focuses on her grandson again, taking a moment before stating, “I don’t know how to help her.”

“Marry her.” Char answers quickly and honestly, her head slowly turning to face her mother, “You were engaged at Christmas and, being the queen of communication that you are, I’m betting you haven’t really talked about it with her since then.”

“I’ve told her, on multiple occasions, that we’d do whatever she wants. If she wishes to elope or have something larger, it’s all her decision. However, she hasn’t said anything substantial about it to me as of yet.” Bernie glances to her daughter finally, “I want to help her, but all I can do is be present...which she doesn’t want.” She pushes back a portion of her hair that has fallen out of the clip in the back of her head with her hand.

“This is your partner. This is the woman you want to spend the rest of your life with. Someone Cam and I actually...love.” Charlotte swallows, shrugging a little, “I know Serena and I both go to Vickers and try to get over our own personal issues, but I’m never going to be Elinor. So, I can never make her truly happy, but...you can. You’re-”

“What makes you think that you don’t make me happy?” Serena interrupts, standing in the doorway, having sneaked down when she felt herself in an empty bed. A throw blanket draped over her shoulders and she looks a bit worse for wear. Her gaze sinks when she feels something pulling at her pajama bottom leg, or someone. Serena reaches down, pulling the boy up into her arms, closing her eyes a moment when he hugs onto her in return. She’s met with silence from the women on the sofa. “Neither of you know how to be quiet...and I felt you get out of bed.”

“Oh, I slept with your fiance, I meant to tell you.” Char attempts to lighten the mood, even slightly, a sudden heaviness felt when her stepmother made her entrance. Her tone dry, neutral, a sense of humor she received from her mother. “To my credit, I didn’t get her drunk, she was already that way when I got into bed with her.”
Serena rolls her eyes, amused, nearing them and sitting in the high backed chair, “You’re dancing around the question.” The boy continues to cuddle against her and she gets the sense that he’s probably tired.

“Don’t worry about it.” Bernie leans over, gently placing a hand on her partner’s knee.

“I do.” Serena shrugs slightly with her free shoulder, “I do worry about your children’s happiness just as I worry about Jason’s.”

Though her mother is attempting to diffuse the subject, Charlotte finally states, “Anytime you start to have some sort of...feelings for me, maternal feelings or what have you, you instantly start to push me away.” She offers a sad, closed mouth smile, “That’s something I just need to come to terms with because, more than likely, it’s never going to change.” Char licks her lips, leaning back against the sofa more, “I’m not...upset or anything, disappointed in myself for thinking you’d be willing to someday mostly.”

She knows she does that, subconsciously mostly. Sometimes, Serena knows, she does it on purpose. Mostly to protect herself, protect her soft heart. “It something I need to work on...and I plan to speak with Annette about it.” She states honestly, “I apologize if I’ve ever made you feel unwanted or unwelcome, that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

Char nods a little, “I know.”

Bernie watches between the two, sensing there’s even more that either woman is willing to say allowed or in front of her. “Okay then.” She exhales slowly, she doesn’t like confrontation or uncomfortable situations. She’ll take care of things when they’re presented to her on the work front, but emotions were never her strong suit. “Shall we go out for dinner?”

“Why not just the two of you?” Charlotte offers, flashing a quick smirk. “Christ knows you haven’t in quite a while.” She stands quickly, “I can keep Cole-”

“I’d rather he come with us, if it’s all the same.” Serena says quietly, “I haven’t seen him all day and-”

“Charlotte’s right, Campbell.” Bernie leans forward again, capturing her partner’s attention. “We can have a night just for us. Spend some time-”
“I don’t want that right now.” Serena shakes her head a little, standing when she begins to hear the soft snoring sounds in her ear of the baby in her arms.

“I’ll make dinner then.” Char nods, glancing between the two, “Chicken franaise...served over haricot vert.” She smirks, “I’ll have it ready in about...twenty to thirty minutes.”

“I’ll forever be envious of your ability to do that.” Serena sways from foot to foot, “I don’t know why I’m letting him sleep. He’ll never go down tonight, when he’s supposed to.”

“It’s actually time for him to sleep. You’re the one that slept too long.” Bernie smirks, watching as her daughter finally steps away to get started in the kitchen. She stands, walking closer to her partner, glad her daughter is finally out of earshot, “Whatever it is that is bothering you, I’m always here for you. We can get through it together.”

“I love you.” Serena leans forward, capturing her partner’s lips, careful of the babe in her arm. “I just need to talk to Annette...then I should be good as new.”

“Fine, but you can talk to me as well if you need to.” Bernie quickly kisses her again, “Also, we need to talk about this wedding. If you want to do what Jason and Greta did, that’s fine, but I want to do whatever it is that you’re able to imagine. I just want to be married to you. I don’t care how we do so, as long as we do so in the very near future.”

“A little.” The blond raises an eyebrow, “Also, I’m tired of sleeping on the sofa.”

Serena grins a little, “I apologize for that. Just needed a good cry by myself is all.” She leans in for another kiss, “Won’t happen again, Major.” Serena gives a wink, a wink filled with promise and understanding. A wink that tells her partner that she’s going to try her best to get through this, not just for herself, but for them as a unit. For them as a family.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Charlotte happens upon a familiar face while having a night at Albie’s.

Fletch tries to protect Charlotte.

Chapter Notes

32 weeks.

Ryan Anand glances around the small watering hole across the way from the hospital. Coworkers galore, which he expected. However, the sight of light blonde hair in the somewhat secluded section causes the corner of his mouth to turn up, “Well, Ms. Wolfe, fancy seeing you here.”

Charlotte lifts her head, nursing a glass of some sort of red wine in her hand, “Dr. Anand, very nice to see you. Need a place to lounge or are you meeting someone here?” Her voice isn’t particularly loud, but it’s lower tones help it reach the man’s ears over the crowd.

“Lone wolf.” He offers a friendly smile, making his way over to sit next to her, “What are you drinking?”

“A lovely plum cabernet with a slight tobacco undertone circa 1938. Though I’m unsure if there’s a tobacco undertone because of the vinters or because of my own fags.” Char smirks, hearing his hearty chuckle. “The even numbered years are superior to the odd numbered years...and I’m paying for it.” She offers him the glass, “Care for a sip?” She isn’t usually this open with people, but something about Ryan Anand makes her heart flutter and her face flush.

Ryan lifts a hand, politely declining, “I’m not much for cab. I’m getting a scotch. Care for another glass of your wine?”

“Oh, I couldn’t-”

“I insist.” Ryan nods, removing his jacket to place on the sofa next to her. He rises from his seat,
making his way to the bar. Ryan orders them both drinks, before feeling someone at his side, the Nursing Coordinator, Aiden Fletcher. “Fletch, how are things?” They’ve always been cordial to one another, the man helping Otter ward from time to time when they were in a rough spot.

Fletch nurses a glass of dark ale. He notices as the young doctor has two drinks placed in front of him. “I was going to offer a drink to you, but I’m betting you’re here with a friend.” He glances around, taking notice of the familiar young woman sitting on the sofa, “Charlotte Wolfe...that who you’re with?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say with , I’m just buying her a drink is all.” Ryan shakes his head a little, “Why, am I stepping on your toes? You know I wouldn’t-”

“Nah, too young for me.” Fletch shakes his head, “Just...be careful with her, eh? Beautiful, intelligent girl, but she’s been through the ringer more than once. More times than she should have in her life.” He takes a sip of his drink, “and, if you use her, you’d have an Army Major, the Medical Director...and myself to deal with.” Many women have liked Ryan Anand around the hospital, but it was rumor that he was a ladies’ man to say the very least.

“Look, I don’t know what opinion you have of me, but...” Ryan gives a quick glance to the sofa, glad she isn’t looking back to him, “I’d hate for you to make assumptions first and be deemed incredibly wrong later.” He isn’t really intimidated, but knows it’s because the man thinks highly of this woman, “At the moment, it’s just drinks between friends. I want to learn more about her. Nothing more at the moment.”

“Just...remember what I said, yeah?” Fletch gives a quick nod with a smirk built onto it, meaning what he said. He steps away from the man, moving back over to a few staffers from Darwin ward.

Ryan exhales, returning to the sofa, “Sorry that had taken so long. Haven’t seen Fletch in a while and he wanted to...catch up.”

“He’s a good guy.” Charlotte rests her elbow on the back of the sofa, better to look at the doctor sitting in front of her, “So...busy day?” Her rich brown eyes glisten from the lower light around the area. “Though, I suppose every day is a busy say for you.”

Shrugging a little, Ryan places her extra glass of wine on the table, amused when she downs the rest of her own glass to take the new one. “I just do my job. I’m not there to complain or think of how hard or busy things are.” He takes a swig of his scotch, “That’s just how I am though.”
“Humble.” Char offers, amused by his subtle shrug. “I like that.”

“So, what of you? How is Cole?”

Charlotte is actually a little shocked that he remembers her son’s name, “He’s crawling, pulling up on tables. All within a couple weeks of one another. We keep attempting to get him to take a few steps, but he’s far too lazy for that.” She huffs a soft chuckle to herself, “He excels.”

“That’s fantastic.” Ryan nods, enjoying when her face seems to light up when speaking of the boy. “I um...this is going to sound...absolutely bizarre and, please, don’t take this the wrong way.” He glances away, slightly embarrassed, “I’ve thought of you often since our chat a couple months ago.”

She finds herself blushing, taking a long sip of her wine in order to formulate a response in her head, “I was...a mess then. Not that I’m much improved now, but-”

“I mean what I said in a good way.” He nods a little, better to lay everything on the table upfront. “It’s frowned upon to ask your patients’ mothers on dates but, I’ve never done it before.” Ryan shrugs, “I reckon since Cole is no longer my patient, that...maybe it would be okay now that I ask you out to dinner sometime.”

Char leans forward, suddenly capturing his lips with her own. She kisses him tenderly, much to his surprise. Backing away after a moment, she swallows. “I uh...” She downs her newer glass of wine, “Do you smoke?” She’s had too much to drink at this point, but she carries her liquor well when it’s wine.

Ryan shakes his head negatively, “but we can stand outside together.” He downs his scotch, earning an amused chortle from the woman, “appreciate the fresh air.” He raises an eyebrow, “Or as fresh as it could possibly be while one is taking comfort in a fag.”

“I get the habit honestly.” Charlotte reaches into her handbag, obtaining her silver lighter and brown paper coated cigarette from it’s matching silver cigarette case. “My Mum has quit her nicotine intake no less than five or six times.” She smirks slightly, standing. Though he said he would go outside with her, she’s still touched when he does.

“You know, your father came to hospital once when Cole was in. I never got around to telling you.” Ryan doesn’t really understand the dynamic of the family, “I didn’t know you had a Dad, but your Mum was there so I didn’t think it was an issue.”
“It isn’t.” Char shakes her head negatively, “I’m working on my issues with him, but...it’s probably going to be a while for me.” She lights her cigarette when they clear the entrance door enough. “My Mum and Serena are my parents now...they’re Cole’s grandparents. The only ones that matter.” She takes a drag of her cigarette, “But it’s whatever. I wouldn’t want to bring you into the drama of.”

“No, I’m interested. I didn’t know anything about your parents when I first met them.” Ryan notices the woman’s amused expression, “About an hour after Cole was admitted, I got a call from Fleur Fanshawe, she’s a consultant in our Obs and Gyne area of Otter-”

“She delivered Cole...and actually a good friend of your director.”

He raises an eyebrow, “Makes sense.”

“What did she say? If you don’t mind my asking.” Charlotte leans her back against the wall, watching the man next to her.

“She gave me a particularly direct threat. Mess up and you’ll deal with me.” Ryan grins a bit when Charlotte gives a hearty, gasping laugh. He could listen to that laugh for hours. “Not going to lie, she probably could hurt me.” The laughing increases and he knows that their night, and hopefully much more, is only just beginning.
Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

Upon realizing Charlotte never came home from the night before, Serena tends to Cole.
Bernie tempts her partner.

Serena carries Cole upstairs after feeding him his breakfast of gently scrambled eggs, most of which he managed to get into his mouth without her help. “Should we wake your Gran?” When the boy claps his chubby hands, babbling very excitedly, it causes her to grin broadly. Pushing open the bedroom door, Serena sets Cole onto the bed, watching as he crawls on top of Bernie, blowing slobbery raspberries on her cheek.

Bernie had heard the boy speaking in the hall and was ready for this. She wraps an arm around him, nuzzling his belly as he gives a deep chortle. “Morning to you as well, Cole.” She glances over to her fiance, “Charlotte make breakfast?”

“She isn’t home.” Serena shakes her head negatively, “I reckon she never returned home at all last night. I received a photograph on my mobile of Charlotte canoodling with someone last night at Albie’s.” She raises her eyebrows, “Has she said anything to you about-”

“I just live here.” Bernie smirks, still accepting her grandson’s cuddles and belly laughs, “Have you tried ringing her?”

“And ruin the excitement I’ll feel when I watch her awkwardly attempt to sneak back into this house and pretend that nothing is out of the ordinary?” Serena shakes her head, “I’ll take what little entertainment I can get from this situation.” She climbs into the bed, sitting up at the foot of the bed to continue the conversation.

“And she calls me a sadist.” She pushes herself up more to lean against the headboard of the bed, “Who, pray tell, was the one to send you this picture?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, she helps her grandson stand by holding him at his sides, unsurprised when he begins to bounce.

“Well, I couldn’t possibly divulge my sources, darling.”
Bernie rolls her eyes, amused. Of course she wouldn’t. “Are you able to tell who the other person is that she’s with?”

“It’s a bit blurry.” Serena shakes her head slightly, disappointed. “I, honestly, couldn’t care who it is though. I’m just happy she’s moving on.”

“Yes, but...is she moving on or is this one of her episodes? If she’s been drinking too much and her anxieties start getting the better of her, she could have just chosen an unsuspecting victim. She doesn’t do well in crowds alone anymore, loud noises bother her...I’m shocked she even went to Albie’s by herself. She could have gone anywhere.” Bernie says honestly, her worries obvious, but not intense. She turns her attention to Cole in her arms, “Shall we go downstairs so you can be in your bouncer, little rabbit?”

“Rabbit? I reckon he’s more of a kangaroo.” Serena stands from her position on the bed, reaching over to take the boy so her partner can get up. “I’ve made coffee as well. I’m actually pleased Henrik has pressured me to take a month’s holiday.” She nods, only actually in her fourth day of it. “He tried to force me to take all three months at once, but I was able to talk him down into splitting it up.”

“Fantastic, maybe you’ll finally start thinking about our wedding now.” Bernie walks around the bed, smirking when she garners her partner’s attention, “Then we can take a whole month or two together and do whatever we want, even if that means we do nothing...as long as we’re together.”

“Okay.” Serena is actually touched by her response, “You aren’t going to force us to another country, are you?”

“Not unless you want to go.” Bernie knows her partner has been rather insistent on staying close to Cole since everything started with his paternal grandmother knowing of his existence. “Maybe you can...give some thought as to visiting Paris for a few days?” When she notices a slight panic starting to spread on the woman’s face, “Just give some thought. I want to have my way with you...and I don’t plan to be quiet about it.” Her tone nonchalant, knowing she’d get a reaction out of her girlfriend.

Serena blushes deeply, smirking. “You’re lucky he isn’t able to speak yet.”

“What is it Char says, I plan to have wild tantric sex with you?” Bernie continues to edge her on, “we should probably just rent a cottage. That way there wouldn’t be any neighbors to complain.” She turns at the bottom of the stairs, poking a finger to Cole’s belly, garnering a giggle from him, “Your Nan can be quite loud when given the opportunity.”
“You’re simply the worst.” Serena walks past the woman, shaking her head a bit, amused by the line of conversation. She sets Cole on the floor, watching as he starts to quickly crawl away from them, toward a stack of his toys. “ Couldn’t possibly lie to you, I’m intrigued.” She leans in, capturing her partner’s lips tenderly, finally parting after a moment.

“Thought you might be.” Bernie mumbles against the woman’s lips, grinning. “I say that we should order take away for lunch and wait in eager anticipation for Char to do the walk of shame into the house...dressed in yesterday’s clothing...with messy hair.”

“Messier than yours?”

“Very funny.” Bernie gives another quick peck against her lips. “I’m getting coffee. Care for a cup?” Noticing her partner’s subtle nod, she makes her way to the kitchen, hearing Cole’s frantic crawling following her. “You’re not getting a snack this early. Nan said you just had breakfast.” The babe sits, just staring up toward her. “Besides, this is your time for freedom. You can have a snack in an hour or two. Just not now.” He does this, he knows he’ll get what he wants from his Gran. “Frozen fruit in the mesh thing?” She offers, not expecting him to answer. “Because you’ve had plenty cereal, knowing you. You love your cereal.” Bernie sighs smelling the air, “and eggs. Really, you’ll eat anything if it’s placed in front of you.” Picking out the mesh teething sock from a drawer, putting a couple frozen pieces of fruit into the the pouch before securing and handing it to the boy. “Your Nan is going to be cross with me for giving you what you want all the time. So, I hope it was worth my struggle to you.” He crawls away with the contraption in his mouth once she hands it to him, causing her to shake her head slowly. “Spoiled rotten.”

“Berenice!” Serena calls once she sees the boy, gumming on the mesh teether filled with a couple pieces of frozen melon. His couple of teeth doing their hardest to break through the mesh, he grins toward her, causing Serena’s face to soften into a smirk. “You are quite the master manipulator, Cole Wolfe.”
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

Upon waking in a strange room, Charlotte receives bad news.

Chapter Notes

The morning after...

Charlotte inhales deeply, slowing bringing herself out of sleep. Patchouli and coconut, she thinks. This isn’t her room. She attempts to move, only to discover she’s on a water bed...and naked. Her eyes open a bit more, this isn’t my room. Panic begins to rise and she pulls the duvet and sheets up, tucking them under her underarms. The shower stops and the door opens, the one connecting the bedroom and the bath.

“Good morning.” Ryan Anand grins toward her, his voice low and calming. “Hangover? I tried to make you keep drinking a bit of water after every few sips. Found out later, the first glass I bought for you was your fourth glass.” He sees her subtle nod, though she looks alarmed still. “I placed some Brufen and a fresh glass of water on your side table before I went out for my run.”

“Just how many glasses of wine did I have last night?” Char runs a hand through her hair, then over her eyes. Blackout curtains, she notices, incredibly thankful for their existence in this moment. She takes the two pills and water from the bedside table, drinking it down.

“Enough.” Ryan shakes his head a little, amused, “Are you okay?”

She nods a little, “You need more pillows on your bed.” Charlotte answers, almost absently, her mind racing. “Was I...um...”

“Just relax.” He sits on the side of the bed, gray towel wrapped around his waist. “You were lovely.” Ryan gently takes her hand, which he feels is trembling, “And you’re absolutely breathtaking this morning.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t...” Charlotte meets his eyes, “I didn’t want this to be how things started between
the two of us. This is never a good start to anything except regret.” She licks her dry lips, taking another sip of her glass of water before setting it back on the side table. “And I don’t want to regret you.”

“Then don’t.” Ryan raises an eyebrow, “We enjoyed one another...something I hope we’ll continue to do. Though, I must admit, I’d still really like to take you out to dinner. Give an old fashioned go of it.” It garners a grin from the woman in front of him. “We can tonight if you’d like.” He shrugs, “Whatever you want.” Turning his head, he hears the buzzing of a mobile. “Hold that thought.” He stands, venturing away from her for a moment, returning with the mobile in his hand, “Yours.”

“Thank you.” Char takes the mobile in her hand, seeing the twenty messages and four missed calls from her brother, telling her that things were ending soon and that she should get there now if she wants to say goodbye. Tears spring to her eyes, “I um...I need to go.” Her voice shakes.

“Of course.” It’s something serious, there’s a definite sudden change in her expression. Ryan tilts his head to the side, “I’ll come with you.”

She doesn’t respond, how could she? She doesn’t know what she’s doing and her mind is running on autopilot. Char is thankful when he places her clothing from the day before onto the bed, offering her one of his slim fit t-shirts just for her to change things up a bit. She’s doing her best not to cry here, not in front of him.

“What’s going on, Ms. Wolfe?” Ryan stops her suddenly, “let me help you.”

“My um...fiancé...Cole’s father...” Charlotte glances away, “This was wrong. I shouldn’t have done this with you. I lured you with a false sense of.”

“No one lured anyone else.” He shakes his head, “I’ll take you wherever you need to go and if you need help when you get there, I’ll give you that as well...even if it’s just holding your hand.” Ryan means it too, not just because he’s a kind soul, but because he’s seen this woman at one of her worst times, and he still knew he wanted to keep seeing her.

“Cam...he said Andy’s started cheyne stokes.” The death rattle. Charlotte starts remembering when she was younger, hearing Marcus explain to Bernie what his mother was doing. That it would be very soon. Grandmother never liked Mum, or her really. My head is getting off the subject.

“Okay.” Ryan nods, “Let me dress. I’ll only be a minute.” He leaves her standing there, and though she’s rather tall and slim, she curls into herself, seeming so small in just that moment. Ryan watches
her, “You never told me that Cole’s father was in the picture.”

“He isn’t.” Char shakes her head a little, “Didn’t want to be...and I didn’t want him to be either.”

“Oh...bad blood?”

Charlotte swallows, “He um...he used to...We had frequent quarrels.” She licks her lips, hating that she’s talking about this now, with this man. This isn’t something you talk about the day after a one night stand, especially if you wish for another date. “I’ve forgiven him...since he took ill.”

Ryan had seen the marks and scars over her body and thought maybe something in her past caused them. Automobile accident, schoolyard fight, but never that she was beaten by the boy’s father...and never that much. She was tortured. “Okay.” That’s all he can manage to say.

The car ride was quiet, with an intensity about the woman in the passenger seat. Neither of them can think of anything to talk about. Not in this moment. Ryan reaches over, gently taking her hand. She’s shaking again. He worries. Something with him wants to make this young woman happy. He’s seen her sad too many times. Charlotte grips onto his hand in return, not really letting it go until they get off the elevator of Darwin ward and she rushes ahead to the secluded room.

Ryan watches as she disappears through the doorway and he just stands there, hands at his sides. Does he wait? Does he follow her inside? There’s a guard at the door and he doesn’t ever see that on Otter. He turns when he feels a hand at his shoulder, “Cam, hey.”

“So, you were the one she was with last night.” Cameron nods knowingly, “Fletch didn’t seem terribly worried when he told me she left Albie’s with someone.” He sighs, motioning toward the room door. “She’s...not going to be well for a bit, I reckon. Bastard has done her more harm than good, but...she’s a soft spot for him.”

“How bad did things get for her during their time together?” Ryan asks carefully, seeing Cam’s negative head shake, it’s really all he needs. He doesn’t go into things, doesn’t need to right now. I want to kill him.

“I can take things from here with her.” Cam says honestly, noticing the blank look on the other man’s face. He doesn’t know what to expect from Ryan Anand. Rumors were either that he was gay or a womanizer, most of which Cameron always thought were a bit...off. However, this one action was going to be the one that set up the course of whatever they want to happen next.
Ryan shakes his head a little, folding his arms as he spots a bench near the door, “You’re busy. I’m here.”
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

Charlotte walks away from her old life.

Though he has no real ties to her, Ryan does something benevolent for Charlotte.

Chapter Notes

Bonus chapter. Later that same day as the last chapter.

Charlotte exits the secluded room. She knows she’s been in the room for quite a long time, but has no concept of just how long that time actually was. She notices Ryan sitting in a chair not far from the room, the door guard gone at this point. A sense of relaxation about her, she gently nudges his leg as he had fallen asleep. It’s dark out.

Ryan slowly begins to straighten up, opening his eyes as he does so. “I’m up-” He pauses, seeing that it’s her, and stands quickly. “Are you okay?”

“You waited for me?” Charlotte didn’t know what he would do and even forgot that he had brought her there in the first place until she saw him sleeping here. “Out here in the hallway?”

He shrugs a little, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, what little he can. “Today is an off day for me and I was just going to lay about and play video games. So, instead, I read an entire book from an app on my mobile and took a nap. Not much different actually.”

Char tilts her head to the side, something else must be lurking behind the corner. The other shoe to drop. *Maybe he’ll be like Anders was and lash out because his meal was cold or because I denied him sex while on a particularly painful menses. “Why?”*

Ryan shakes his head, “Cam offered to tend to you, but...he was busy and I wanted to make sure you ate and stuff when you were finished. Not that he wouldn’t, but-”

“He wouldn’t.”
“Okay.”

“You really want that dinner with me, eh?” Char raises an eyebrow, intrigued by this man even more than she was before. He’s being tenacious in his courting of her. “Quite ambitious of you. I suppose I’m now, technically, a widow.” She doesn’t seem upset, more like she’s numb. “This...his...” She turns a little, giving another glance to the room she knows there’s just a husk left of the soul that once inhabited the body within, “It’s um...bittersweet.”

“I can understand that.” Ryan nods a little, taking a gentle hold of her hand, the trembling stopped. “Cam phoned your parents...gave them a heads up.”

“Serena has been on holiday...and hasn’t wanted to be more than ten meters from Cole during it.” Char shrugs, starting to walk toward the elevators, “I think she just wants to be the first one to see him take his first steps...before the rest of us.” She pushes the button to call the elevator car.

Ryan huffs a soft chortle, “It’s close to nine...they’re probably all asleep by now.”

“I...” Char shakes her head negatively as they step onto the elevator car, “I’m not really up for-”

“I just thought that you were probably going to be crumb crackered, so thought I could just take you home in the morning.” Ryan answers honestly, no ulterior motives to his voice or actions. “Mostly so we don’t wake your parents or Cole by you getting in late.”

“Cole sleeps through anything, but open a bag of crisps and he’s bright eyed and bushy tailed.” She exhales slowly, seeing an amused smirk on the man’s face. Char shakes her head, “I really don’t understand why you’d want this baggage...why you’re-” She glances to him again, “Was I that good in bed?”

“Honestly, and please take no offense, I don’t remember how good or not good either of us were last night.” Ryan shakes his head. “For all I know, we could have came to mine, ripped off all our clothes, and fell asleep from the gentle waves of Gary.”

It takes Charlotte a moment, “Your waterbed?”
“I just tell people I only sleep with Gary and they get off my case. My Mum thinks I’m gay, but my Dad knows otherwise...and it isn’t actually much of a lie.” Ryan knows it sounds ridiculous, “Nothing is worse than a Pakistani mother asking have you met a nice girl every single time you speak, so Gary was named about...a year ago?” It’s a question to himself, which he answers with a quick nod, “A year ago.”

“Well, Gary as...monoamorous as you are?”

“I’m a bit...choosy about who I bring round to mine.” Ryan answers honestly. She doesn’t seem fazed. He begins to think he may have said something wrong and sighs to himself. The space between them grows quiet, he doesn’t like the silence. “I’m sorry about your loss, Ms. Wolfe.”

Charlotte slowly glances up toward him, giving a sad smile. “Thank you.” Her tone soft and she feels her eyes are starting to dampen. “I don’t think I’m going to get much of that.”

“Get what?”

“People offering condolences.” Char swallows, “There aren’t many around here that don’t have a sense of...how things were before. Not to mention my parents...Mum and Serena are probably celebrating, wanting to hold a parade in the streets.” She shakes her head slightly, pausing, “Would you mind just...taking me home? I’m not going to be very good company tonight and...I just kind of want to hold onto Cole.”

Ryan nods, unsure of why he even suggested otherwise, “I’m still buying you some takeaway.”

“I’m not afraid to tuck into some leftovers.” Char smirks ever so slightly, “I appreciate your concern though.”

“Of course...but I’m still getting takeaway.” Ryan just holds her hand, their fingers laced between one another. It warms him. Please, don’t mess this up. Don’t be eager. Her hands are soft and he can’t take his eyes off her. Calm yourself. “Just know that...I’m here for you when you’re ready.”

When you’re ready. Charlotte nods slowly, but will she ever truly be ready?
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

A playful Serena tries to get Charlotte to talk of her night.

After tempting fate, Charlotte’s guilt overwhelms her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Serena descends the stairs within her home, half past two in the morning. She notices light radiating from the kitchen. It isn’t terribly bright, probably just the vent light from over the stove. Enough to light the space without being too jarring to the eyes. She pads her way over in her bare feet, flipping on the light once she reaches the space. The young woman within doesn’t jump, doesn’t seem the slightest bit bothered as she tucks into a salad in front of her. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks.” Charlotte replies quietly, another bite and Serena turns the light back off. She’s glad, Char rarely uses it herself. She’s sitting on one of the stools at the kitchen island, glass of white wine not far from her. “I...I’m sorry for not phoning.”

“Cameron handled it.” Serena gives a slight negative head shake as she moves closer to the kitchen island, standing on the other side of it to face the young woman better. There’s a sadness about her, about this young person. “Who brought you round?”

Char runs her tongue over her teeth as she lifts her head. She wants to reply with something snarky, does it matter. “I uh...” I owe her the truth. “Ryan Anand.” She reaches over to the glass of white wine, taking a sip and returning the glass to its position. “We...just happened to be in the same place at the same time.”

Bernie was right. “You went to Albie’s to meet with him last night?” Serena eyes the glass, curious if this is the young woman’s first.

“Coincidence.”

Serena gives a soft, closed mouth smile. “You two hit it off-”
“No.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, “I mean...at what cost? My indiscretions caused Anders his life and...” She doesn’t have tears in her eyes, just numbness about her. “I cheated on Anders because I was drunk...and stupid. I don’t even really remember anything. I just...I know this is...cosmic retribution of sorts.” She stabs at her salad, holding up the fork after doing so, “for my own selfish lust.”

“Anders Hero was not a good man, Charlotte.” Serena shakes her head negatively, “He was horrendously proud and spiteful. He wanted nothing except unhappiness for you.” She reaches over to the young woman’s glass, taking a sip herself. “Maybe not after his mind went, but...he never had any intention of wanting the best for you; he wanted you to be indebted to him. He wanted to own you.”

She knew this was going to be Serena’s reaction. “I don’t...I don’t want to hear it right now, honestly.” Charlotte lifts her hand up a little, “I am thankful that he’s given me a beautiful, perfect son. I’m thankful that he made certain that Cole and I would be taken care of financially.” She clears her throat a little, “I understand how thrilled you probably are by his demise, but...I’m not. I feel lost...and disgusting.”

“Disgusting?”

“Ryan Anand is handsome and smart.” Char takes a bite of her salad, “He bought me food on the way back here, he...he held my hand and didn’t demand anything of me.” She finishes chewing, “and it felt...good.”

Serena furrows her brows slightly, “So why are you-”

“Because I shouldn’t feel anything good right now. I don’t deserve it.” Char suddenly slaps her bowl of salad off the island and brings her hands to cover her face. Guilt flooding her thoughts more than before. She’s almost sure she saw Serena jump. Her eyes reddened when she brings her hands down and she’s bouncing her foot on one of the bottom pegs of the stool, “I don’t deserve any of this, Serena.”

“Except you do, sweetheart.” Serena reaches over, gently taking the young woman’s hands into her own. “You deserve all good things that come to you.”

Char stands up suddenly, pulling away from the woman to clean up the salad from the floor, “You wouldn’t underst-”
“Except I would.” Serena shakes her head, finally garnering Charlotte’s attention. “When I discovered my ex-husband cheated on me the first time, I was hurt. I was angry. We divorced, he remarried...divorced again. I never did.” She tilts her head slightly, “Then we were older and Elinor was a teenager at the time, I started to trust him again. I thought he was a changed man.” Serena moves over, trying to help what little she’s able to, “Except he was deceiving me yet again...with a nurse that worked under me. He denied it, I believed him.” She collects the pieces of lettuce in the plastic container before pushing it into the bin, “When I realized I was had again...I felt so stupid. I felt like...happiness wasn’t in my cards, so to speak.”

Charlotte doesn’t reply, just letting the woman speak and seeing where it goes.

“I dated after, but they were mostly...not for me. I was waiting for them to...” Serena shakes her head, “For them to be awful. Waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Then I...I met your Mum. I wasn’t expecting it. I wasn’t...I definitely wasn’t looking for love, she was one of my best friends.” Folding her arms, Serena shrugs, “Sometimes love happens when you least expect it to.”

“Oh, please, don’t call a one night stand love.” Char scowls a little, “He and I...it was just a thing that happened. It happened and it probably shouldn’t have happened.”

“Okay.” Serena doesn’t believe that for a moment. She remembers how the two were when Cole was poorly months prior. Even believing that it would only be a matter of time before they found one another again. “Just...maybe talk things through with Annette Vickers?”

Charlotte finishes cleaning up the salad with its dressing, standing upright to meet the woman’s face. “I’m tired. Today was a long day and...I’m tired.” She swallows, “but I know...I know that feeling isn’t going to stop any time soon.” She licks her lips slowly, trying to find the words, “I know you’re happy about this...and you’ve every right to be, but...I loved Anders. I did. After all the shit he put me through...us through...and I still loved him. So...I just want to crawl into bed...and just think about him.” Her eyes are ready to shed tears again as she finally turns away from her stepmother, moving to the hall and stairs.

Serena stands there for a moment, wanting only the best for Charlotte, but not knowing how to make her feel better now. Charlotte must grieve. She knows, but Anders Hero didn’t deserve her grief, or even a second thought. Serena finishes the glass of wine before washing the glass, returning to bed with the calming thought, at least she’s home.

Chapter End Notes

Next few chapters are going to be about Charlotte dealing, or not dealing, with all this.
Just so you all know.
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

Bernie delivers distressing news to her patient.

A grieving Charlotte throws her anger toward the wrong person.

Dom helps Bernie avert a crisis.

Chapter Notes

Roughly almost a week after the last chapter.

This is where the rewrite starts. I've mentioned a few times that there was a different direction entirely planned for this story, but I changed my mind...thankfully. You guys deserve better and this is much better than where I was going to go, at least I think it is.

I do hope you all enjoy the ride.

Irene Hero rests on Keller ward, having required a series of operations to mend multiple internal injuries due to decades of physical trauma at the hands of her husband. Her eyes open slowly, seeing the familiar blonde standing at the foot of her hospital bed. “You said you weren’t a doctor.”

“I said no such thing, Mrs. Hero.” Bernie answers quickly, returning the file to the end of the bed. She pulls her stethoscope from its place in her front pocket to put the eartips into her ears, using her hand to quickly warm the diaphragm. “I’m just going to have a quick listen.”

“Περιμένετε.” She lifts her hand to take hold of the surgeon’s wrist. Irene gives her eyes a moment to adjust to get a better look at the woman’s face, “You operated?”

“Yes, I did.” Bernie decided, once the woman was moved to their floor from AAU, that she would be neutral to the woman. Not bringing any unnecessary attention to herself. She knows who this woman is. Knows how much this woman’s mere existence caused her girlfriend to doubt her role in their family. “Surgery went well.”

Irene continues to stare toward the other woman’s face. Younger than her. Possibly the age of one of her own daughters. Her eyes drift down, glancing to the woman’s name tag, “Wolfe...My...” She swallows, her voice hoarse, almost fragile. “My son’s wife...didn’t take his name. Same name as
Licking her lips absently, she pulls the stethoscope eartips from her ears, returning the instrument to her pocket. “Correct.” Bernie nods slowly, “Charlotte is my daughter.” She knows the whole marriage thing was something Charlotte had to tell them in order to allow her entrance to his guarded room.

“So, you know who I am.”

“I do.” She watches the woman, a moment, “You’re my patient.”

“I don’t want trouble.” Irene says quietly, “Once my Achilles’ is well enough to leave-”

Bernie begins to slowly shake her head negatively, “No, Mrs. Hero, that...” She thought the woman would have been told by someone, anyone. “Your son lost his battle with his ailments nearly a week ago.” Bernie can see the hurt begin to spread across the woman’s features, not to mention her elevating heart rate. “He wasn’t alone...and he went peacefully...without pain.”

Giving a subtle nod, Irene glances away from the woman, tears beginning to fill her eyes though she does a great job at not reacting to them. She’s had to do that a lot. “Was your daughter the one with him when he died?”

“She was, yes.”

“I am...κανονισμένος...satisfied that he was not alone. I couldn’t...” Irene pauses, trying to hold herself together, “I wasn’t strong enough.” A tear finally escapes, but she doesn’t acknowledge it, “I apologize.”

“You were ill, Mrs. Hero. You were here.” Bernie shakes her head, “I don’t-”

“She needs to make her own peace with herself.” The curtains pulled on either side of the bed except for the foot. Charlotte finally steps into the area, watching the women. She slowly folds her arms across her chest, “Only she can do that...and she knows that.” Her eyes reddened from nights and days of crying. Not knowing what else to do.
Bernie glances over, recognizing her daughter’s voice. She knows the young woman has virtually closed herself off to her and Serena since arriving back home nearly a week prior from her one night stand with Ryan Anand, who Charlotte hadn’t spoken to since. “I’ll leave the two of you to-”

“No, you’ll stay.” Charlotte nods, “You’ll stay and...” She slowly licks her lips in thought, eyes drifting to Irene, “He never once stopped talking about you. Never once blamed you for all that happened. He loved you. In the end there were no...no qualms. It was just him...and he had no idea what was going on in the world around him.”

A part of Bernie wants to gather her daughter into her arms, while another part knows she shouldn’t. Not here, not in front of this woman. “As I said previously, peacefully.”

“No, it shouldn’t have been.” Char glances away, just needing to get things out, “He should have been raked across the coals...all the broken bones and dislocations he gave me. It got so bad, that I used the medical aid training I received as a teenager on a daily basis on myself. I’d set my nose, I’d push back in a dislocated shoulder or finger, as if they were nothing. He set up alarms on the doors and windows in our home so that I wouldn’t open them...attempting to escape. Andy did the same with the desktop computer. Oh, and let’s not forget taking the mobile to work with him every day.” Her eyes are glassy, “My mother would send me messages or phone me, but...I didn’t respond. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t and I’d be punished if I tried.”

Irene stares at the young woman and it’s as if none of this is foreign to her. Not familiar either, but...it was troubling all around. “The plight of a Hero wife.”

“No, Mrs. Hero, no it is not. Stop saying that.” Charlotte places her hands on the foot bar at the end of the bed, her voice raising ever so slightly, “He ruined me. We weren’t even married, but he didn’t remember that. He didn’t remember that I blocked him from the room when I was a patient here, didn’t remember I ran when I realized he knew where I was staying.” She doesn’t know if she’s angry or frustrated, speaking through her gritted teeth, “If it weren’t for my son, I would have offed myself months ago just so I could stop...stop feeling this.”

Bernie turns toward her daughter, ready to pull her away, “Char, this isn’t-”

“It is the perfect time for this.” Charlotte stops her mother, knowing exactly what she was about to say, “He put me through hell. Actual hell. Put me through hell and...I still bloody loved him. I hated him and I loved him...all at the same time.”

“Okay.” Wrapping an arm around her daughter, she uses the other hand to pull the curtain around the bed more. Bernie backs the young woman up from the sick woman, “I know you’re upset. I
understand.”

“No, you don’t. You have no idea.” Charlotte’s cheeks reddened, “What it’s like to love and hate someone at the same time...knowing they were the absolute worst person in the world and you shouldn’t have the feelings that you have because of it.” Her voice hitches, her chest starting to heave a bit, Char’s knees buckle slightly.

“Dr. Copeland, could you get me a chair, please?” Bernie calls over her shoulder, holding her daughter up, able to see the young doctor in her peripheral vision. Glad when he responds accordingly.

“Everything okay?” Of course Dom had been listening for a bit, how could he not? This situation is familiar to him, not to the extreme that Charlotte Wolfe has experienced, but...he just knows and it’s something others wouldn’t understand. He quickly meets Bernie’s eyes as she lowers her daughter into the wheelchair provided.

Being that she’s hardly even seen her daughter in the past week, the young woman barricading herself in her bedroom. Bernie crouches in front of the young woman, “Charlotte, look me in the eye.” She brings her hand up when the young woman doesn’t, gently forcing her to. Her other hand takes hold of the young woman’s wrist without her noticing, casually taking her pulse. “Deep breaths, Char.”

Dom watches as Berenice Wolfe, for one of the few times he’s ever seen, breaks her stoic exterior in front of all these people. Something she rarely ever did. It causes him to smirk, touched by the care demonstrated between the two. This is a different woman than the one Cameron Dunn rags on at Albie’s late at night.

“I need to go. I can’t...be here.” Charlotte’s hands tremble as she shakes her head negatively. Her eyes are frenzied and it almost appears as if she’s confused of the situation. “I can’t.”

“Dr. Copeland, get her set up in my office with a saline drip. Give her a quick check over with vitals. I’ve a sneaking suspicion she’s dehydrated.” Bernie doesn’t remove her eyes from her daughter’s as she speaks with the doctor, “Stay with her for a few moments while I finish up here with Mrs. Hero.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Dom pushes the chair away from the hospital bed, doing as requested. He leans down, speaking into the young woman’s ear, “I think you and I...should have a good, old fashioned chin wag.”
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

After Dom tells her how alike they are, Charlotte makes a shocking revelation to him.

Bernie opens up to her daughter.

Chapter Notes

I like to think this story is as if one were to only watch clips of a single character's/single family's side of the show. There's other things going on for other characters, but they aren't really featured in this story. Things need to get a bit worse before they get better and when it's a character who has a bit of an unstable temperament, the strangest of things can get them back on track. This isn't the thing to do that, but it will come soon enough.

This chapter is just a bit after the last.

Readers, you make my heart feel super happy.

“She does this all the time.” Char tilts her head to the side, watching the doctor in front of her.

“Overreacts.”

Dom smirks, amused by the young woman as he inserts the intravenous line into her arm. “Actually, most times, she underreacts, then she fixes her mistake a bit later. ‘Start from the bottom’ mentality. Nine times out of ten, it works incredibly well. Sometimes not though.” He glances up to the clear bag, making sure the drip works, glad he pulled over a chair with an IV pole attached to the back.

She watches straight ahead, “She has a habit of manhandling me.” Char licks her lips, though her mouth is dry and it doesn’t really make a difference. “I know she means well, but...I don’t like it.”

“You didn’t mind when you were with your ex.” Dom begins to clean up the supplies he used, feeling that the young woman is watching him.
“I hardly even know you. You have absolutely no business judging my life choices.”

“Oh, I’m not judging.” He returns to his seat in front of her, “Quite the opposite, actually.” Dom clears his throat, folding his arms over his chest casually. “Before I was with my husband, the relationship I was in was not...healthy. The man I was with abused me, threatened my friends...treated me terribly. I stayed with him. I didn’t know, while he was taking those frustrations out on me, that he was doing anything to my friends, but...” Dom shrugs, feeling the young woman’s eyes are watching him as he glances through the window behind the desk.

Charlotte is nearly glaring, “He had reasons for-”

“There are always reasons, sweetie!” Dom’s voice raises slightly as he stands, walking around to sit on the edge of the desk. “Had a bad day at work, agreed to go to the pub instead of staying home, invited my Mum over for dinner-”

“He had a bloody brain tumor!” Char argues back, her voice quieting after, “Stage four cancer in his brain and spine.”

“I remember Serena Campbell coming in here with a busted lip. I remember the gossip from the nurses about you in AAU before that.” Dom shakes his head, “Listen, it doesn’t matter his reasons, it mattered that he did it in the first place. No one deserves to be treated like you were. Not you, not me, not anyone else.”

“I wanted it. I wanted to be a loyal wife.”

“Being loyal does not mean needing to accept abuse. It doesn’t mean not fighting back.” Dom shakes his head slowly, “I knew that, but I still needed to hear someone else say it. I still needed someone to tell me that I deserved better and that he was an actual douche canoe. Your Mum was one of the people that helped me with that, actually. Though...a lot of people don’t know that. She doesn’t like for people to know she isn’t a tank...even though she’s gotten a little better since she shacked up with Serena Campbell.”

Char nods slowly, finding herself growing more reserved, “I know.” She clears her throat a little, the room falling silent and she knows the doctor is studying her. “He’s still controlling me from the grave...and I’m letting him.”

Yeah.” Dom nods a little, “Yeah, you are.”
“My therapist believes I’m unable to...separate myself from it all. From him. From that life.” Char swallows, “It’s really hard when I see his beautiful son every single day, knowing he wouldn’t exist if I didn’t go through all that I did...or that I know that his Mum is right here in this ward...especially when my own mother is the one tending to her.” She nods a little, “It’s really hard.”

“No one said it’s easy.”

“You didn’t willingly have your abusive ex’s child, Dr. Copeland.” She answers quietly, “I promised myself...when I was pregnant with Cole that...I’d be a proper Mum. A good Mum who never once made him doubt my love for him. I’d...never leave him, never...” Char has tears in her eyes again, though she does her best not to shed them, “All I want to do is run away from him at the moment...and I’m...incredibly ashamed of that. Makes me no better than my own mother was when I was small.”

Dom finds himself nodding as he watches her, “Have you told your parents how you feel?” Seeing her subtle negative head shake, “Why not?”

“How could I possibly?” Charlotte whispers, “It would undermine all the amazing things they’ve done for me.”

“Maybe, just maybe, all you need is a weekend holiday or something. Just...go to Paris or Madrid or someplace fascinating for a few days. Get your mind and body and spirit away from this place.” Dom offers, “I’m sure your parents wouldn’t mind watching your son one bit, or even Lofty and I could sit for you. There’s plenty of people in your corner that will always have your back.”

“I shouldn’t expect them to though. I should be able to...do things on my own. To deal with this on my own.” She glances up to the bag above her chair, glad it’s nearly finished. Then over to the doctor near her, “Because after my theoretical holiday, I’ll come back to this...and I’m afraid I’ll...revert to old habits.”

“Well, from my experience, the worst thing you can do is close yourself off and let your thoughts of inadequacy and hypotheticals get the best of you. Because they will. They absolutely will.” It’s obvious that he means every word of what he says. Dom glances over when the door opens, the surgeon giving a quick tilt of her head, “That’s my cue to go, but...feel free to ring me anytime. I mean it. The Major has my digits.”

Bernie waits until he exits before closing the door behind herself, remaining silent before taking a
“Seat in her chair behind her desk, “How are you feeling?” Noticing the slight shrug from the young woman, she continues, “Is there anyway I can help you?”

Char gives a bitter, low chuckle to herself, “Make me forget anything about Anders Hero. Are you able to do that?” She waits a beat, “I didn’t think so.”

“What about speaking with Annette Vickers? I can see if she’s a spot available—”

“I need to learn to deal with these things on my own, Mum.”

Bernie rolls her desk chair closer to her daughter, having realized the drip was finished, “Can I tell you something I’ve never told another living soul, not even Serena?” She notices a subtle nod from the young woman in front of her as she gently starts removing the IV line. “When I came home after the IED, I was...having great many issues with coping. I gave up my military career for you and Cameron, even Marcus, because I knew you all were so worried. I realized I needed to take myself out of that situation in order to deal with it. I started focusing on work again...mostly to get my mind off of...everything.” She shakes her head, placing a band-aid onto the spot where the IV just was. “I...still couldn’t cope here either. I couldn’t deal with my own thoughts that were going on in my head.” Her tone gentle, “Then I started to have feelings for Serena and...I didn’t know how to cope with that either.”

Charlotte is surprised her mother is opening up to her, even just a little bit. “ Didn’t help that Cam and I—”

She places a hand on her daughter’s forearm, shaking her head to stop the young woman’s course of thought, “It didn’t matter. I needed to do what I needed to do in order to help myself.” Bernie shrugs a little, “I went to the Ukraine to help train...and while I was there, I realized that running never solved anything for me. I got in contact with Veterans Affairs and...I managed to find a therapist that...had experience in dealing with former military. It was exactly what I needed...to admit that I could not do it on my own.” She offer a gentle, closed mouth smile. “I know you haven’t spoken to Ms. Vickers in weeks...and I reckon you know that she has the ability to help you a great deal with all of this...if you let her.”

“I wanted.” Char’s voice breaks and she takes a moment before continuing, “I want to deal with it myself, but the...the thoughts I’ve been having...haven’t been good ones.”

“I know.” Bernie cautiously reaches her hands out, wanting to hug her daughter, but asking for permission to do so. She’s glad when Char willingly leans toward her, holding on like when she was a small girl. “We’ll do whatever needs doing to get you feeling better.”
This is exactly what she needs. Charlotte closes her eyes a little, just letting her mother tend to her. Really, it’s all she’s ever needed, though she would never admit it. “Thank you.” She finds herself whispering.

“Anything for my darling girl.” Bernie presses a kiss to her daughter’s temple, needing to hold onto her as well.
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

Serena tends to Charlotte after an accident in the kitchen.

Charlotte requests Serena’s silence when she reveals her life-changing plans.

Chapter Notes

Same day as the last chapter, well...kinda.

Serena keeps an arm around Cole as he sleeps between his grandparents. She watches him sleep, his chest rise and fall, the adorable thing he does with his mouth as if he has a pacifier there. He’s perfect. Serena knows that she could easily do this for hours and never sleep. She tilts her head to the side when she hears a loud clang from the level below. Loud enough to travel through the closed bedroom door.

“Shit.” Charlotte whispers to herself, quickly putting her hand under cold water in the kitchen. She’s unsteady on her feet. “Shit, shit, shit.” She continues to mutter to herself.

Descending the stairs, ever so slightly bleary eyed, Serena catches sight of the young woman at the sink. A part of her shocked that she’s finally outside of her room. “Everything okay?” She croaks a bit, not realizing her voice was starting to settle before drifting off to sleep. She knew that whatever happened, the young woman was not okay.

“Cut myself, accidentally.” Char slurs a little, “I...I started making a cake. I was doing it to thank you...because you deserve something nice.” She lazily glances over her shoulder. “Come and take a look?”

“At the cake or your finger?” Serena nears her regardless, glancing to the sink, “Let me see.” She gently pulls the young woman’s hand from underneath the running water, watching as the slit fills up with blood. “Oh Charlotte,” Serena whispers under her breath as she snarls her lip a little, knowing that if the young woman wasn’t intoxicated, this would probably be hurting her a lot more than what it currently is, “What were you even cutting?”

“Candied lemons. It’s for a lemon bundt.” Charlotte watches Serena as she tends to her finger, “Do
“Lemon cake is lovely, but I’d like it if you didn’t hurt yourself much more.” Serena sighs, wrapping the young woman’s hand in a towel, “Hold it above your head, I’ll go and get the first aid.” She sighs, trying her best to be quick. “You know, I’m going to need to refill this pretty soon.” Serena says aloud, unsure if Charlotte had even heard her, not really caring if she didn’t. She doesn’t take long before returning back to the young woman.

Charlotte has the towel unwrapped, but under her hand, peering closely at the cut as if ready to dissect it. She jumps when she hears the other woman call her name, “This should hurt, right?”

“I told you to leave it wrapped and keep it above your head.”

“No, you just told me to hold it above my head. I just didn’t listen to you.” Char mumbles, then juts her hand out toward the woman, “Should it bleed this much?”

“It’s an extremedy and you aren’t applying pressure, nor are you holding it above your head. So, it’s going to bleed more, yes.” Serena sighs a little, motioning to the kitchen island, “Did you properly clean it out?”

“I...I mean, I guess...” Charlotte shrugs, “I don’t know.” She pitifully pouts, watching the woman.

“Have you been drinking or did you take something?” Serena uses the bag of simple saline in the bag, rinsing the young woman’s finger with the solution before using surgical glue within the pack to carefully push the ends of the cut together. “You’re lucky I caught you and not your mother.” She raises her eyebrow, being careful.

“Rum went into the cake. Rum and lemon. Like a Rum Sour. You now that one?” Char lifts her head, watching Serena’s face instead of her own finger. “I didn’t have any Amaretto, or I’d have made that. Rum is nice though.”

Serena’s amused by the young woman, “I’m sure it will be lovely.”

“I had some rum.”
“Quite a bit from the sound of it.” She finishes with the young woman’s finger, surprised when Charlotte leans forward to hug onto her suddenly. This sense of emotion the young woman displays is rather abnormal to her, but not unappreciated. “It’s okay, Charlotte. Your finger will be fine.” Serena brings a hand up to rub the top of Charlotte’s back in their embrace, between her shoulder blades.

“I can’t finish the cake. I got blood on the lemons.” Char pouts, nuzzling her face against Serena’s neck like a child, “There won’t be cake until I buy more.”

“Oh, I don’t care about the cake.” Serena shakes her head a little, still rubbing the young woman’s back, “Are you okay?”

“Mum made me take an IV for dehydration earlier.” She speaks quietly, going quiet for a moment before continuing, “Can I tell you something that...I don’t want to mention to Mum right now?” Charlotte doesn’t move, blinking slowly.

Serena is amused she even asks anymore, “Of course.”

“I’ve...I’ve been thinking of leaving. Cole is much better off with you and Mum than he could ever be with me.” Char swallows, “I’m...not a good Mum. I haven’t got it in me. I tried...and I’ve failed.”

That’s the last thing she expected to hear from her step-daughter’s mouth, “Did you tell Annette how you feel?”

Charlotte shakes her head negatively, “I’ve an appointment the day after tomorrow. Will...will you sit in with me?”

“You want me to sit in on your personal therapy session with Annette Vickers?”

“Would that be a bad idea?”

Serena lifts her head to look the young woman in the eye, “It isn’t that it would be a bad idea, I just imagine you discuss things with her that you wouldn’t want Bernie or myself to hear.” She tilts her head to the side, “I think you’re just...depressed right now. Depression is a bastard and makes one do ridiculous things at times.” She pauses, “Like deciding to make a cake at three in the morning, only to drink most of the rum and slice a finger trying to cut candied lemons.” A slight smirk grows on
Serena’s face, “I don’t want you to decide anything drastic without speaking to her first. That includes leaving Cole with us and running away.”

Charlotte nods, lifting her head to meet the woman’s eyes, “I just think it would be best for him. I don’t necessarily want to do it, but...I think I need to.”

“No, sweetheart, you don’t.” Serena shakes her head slowly, “You’re having a hard time with all of this...how you’re supposed to feel is a myth. No one is supposed to feel any certain way. You feel however you feel. That’s just how it is.” Serena carefully wipes the remaining blood away from the young woman’s hand, needing to occupy herself during the conversation. “Whatever you decide, Mum and I are always going to stand by you. I suppose your father as well, but who really cares about him.”

It is enough to garner a slight amused smile from the young woman, “You’re supposed to be planning a wedding...not worrying about me.” Lifting her free hand up, Char tucks a piece of hair behind her ear.

“I’ll do what I please, thank you.” Serena gently lifts a finger to tap the younger woman’s nose, knowing how incredibly delicate her emotions are at this point. She hears a quick giggle escape from Char’s lips and knows things should be okay for her at the moment, especially after she sleeps this off. Though it does cause an internal dilemma for herself, whether to break the request of this young woman in order to give her own fiance a heads up, or to just wait to see what happens tomorrow. Decisions, decisions.
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

Bernie spends time with her grandson as they form a routine.

Serena reveals information to her partner, only to receive an unexpected response.

Chapter Notes

I, literally, wrote this last night. I realized the chapter that was supposed to follow the last one (which is now chapter 95), just didn't give any sort of conclusion to the issue mentioned in the chapter previous. Hopefully this is a bit better.

Serena yawns when the light from the morning hits her eye. She has a later shift today and wasn’t awakened by her usual alarm. The alarm she usually sets just to maintain a schedule. Usually before everyone else wakes. She feels the bed empty next to her, Bernie and Cole missing. Pushing herself up, she makes her way back downstairs. It’s just after ten in the morning.

Bernie sways with her grandson, “Already tired and you woke only two hours ago.” She pauses, “or are you just doing this because you’d like a snack?” She makes a face, tilting her head to better look at the boy on her shoulder, “Do you want some of your melon?”

“He always wants melon.” Serena enters the kitchen space, glad Bernie’s put the coffee pot on. “Why didn’t you leave my alarm clock alone?”

“I would have awoken you when it was time to start preparing.” Bernie opens the freezer, removing the bag of frozen melon. “You have blood on your shirt.” She says without motioning to the spot, but it’s obvious she has a slight concern about her with the statement.

“Charlotte’s.” She answers quickly, pouring herself a mug of coffee. Black, how she likes it. “We need to talk.” When Serena sees Bernie’s gaze toward her, she continues, “This stays between you and I...because she’s told me this in drunken confidence and I don’t want her knowing I’ve broken that trust.”

Bernie nods a little, “Is she okay?”
“Physically, yeah. She just cut her finger. Too pissed to be cooking in the first place.” Serena lifts her hand, running her hand through her short hair. “Bernie, she wants to leave.” She swallows, folding her arms securely around herself. “To...have us tend to Cole and just...go.”

Looking away, Bernie focuses on filling Cole’s netted teether with his pieces of frozen melon before setting him on the floor with it. The past repeats itself. It always does. “If that’s what she wants, Serena, we have to respect that.” Her tone more quiet than before. “We can’t stop her.”

“She doesn’t want that though.” She takes another sip from her mug. “Surely you understand that.”

Bernie stares out in front of her, “I’m not interfering, Serena. This is something she needs to work through with her therapist. Our opinions do not matter in this.”

Serena stands a bit straighter, “She’s not you at that age.” She says finally, “Your experiences and her experiences are different.”

“I won’t force her to be a mother if she doesn’t want to be one.” She finally turns her head to meet the eye of her partner, her own eyes glassy. “I know what that feels like. Expected to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother...and sometimes it just isn’t the right thing to do.” Bernie swallows, “Cole will suffer just like they did...and I’m not prepared to put him through that.”

“Neither do I. These are two different things though.”

“I’ve only just recently gotten to a point with my children where...they’re comfortable with me. Where they don’t feel as if they need to put on a facade to speak with me.” She casually licks her lips before continuing, “And I with them. I never felt like they liked me when they were small...and when they were teenagers, I expected the best from them.” Bernie takes a moment before continuing, “Charlotte fell in line, but she was always Marcus’s girl and she played that up brilliantly. If you don’t like what Mum says, go and ask Dad sort of mentality. Cameron was...feral.”

Serena smirks slightly, listening to her partner. “During the divorce, Marcus pitted them against you because he knew that he could.”

“There was no pitting. Side with Dad who has been there, somewhat, their whole lives...or side with Mum who continued to run away to the Army because she could be her true self there...” Bernie shrugs, “Doesn’t sound like much of an argument. I never really wanted to be a mother and I think
they knew that.” She clears her throat, “Subconsciously knew that. Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t give them the world...I would. I love them more than anything. I just...I wasn’t ready to conform.”

“And you’re ready to be a Gran that takes care of him twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week now?” Serena glances down to the babe, who is staring up at them with his large brown eyes. “I mean...I couldn’t possibly live without him at this point, but its still an undertaking.”

“It’s a different time now.” Bernie nods, following her eyes and starting to smile when the boy offers his netted teething pouch back up to her for more. “And if we had the opportunity to raise our children together...things could have been very different.” She leans down to obtain the device, happy to oblige the boy.

Serena tilts her head to the side, “Agreed. So...what do we do?”

“What we’ve always done.”

“Support Charlotte.” She answers quietly, “Accept her decision, but let her guide the ship.” Serena lifts the boy to sit on the counter top, “and make sure Cole is tended to.” She leans forward, softly kissing his brunette hair. “I do hope she realizes how needed she is though. That the depression will go away eventually...with time. That depression, as a whole, makes people do things that they wouldn’t otherwise think to do.”

“No matter the decision or the outcome, we’ll deal with it together.” Bernie glances over to her partner after handing her grandson his melon. She leans over, tenderly pushing her lips against that of her fiance.

When their kiss breaks, Serena continues, “She wants me to go to her therapy session today...I’m hoping that was the rum talking last night though.”

Bernie curls her lip in mock disgust, “As do I. Last thing I want to hear is Char’s inner monologue.” She lets Serena continue to hold their grandson in place while she moves over to the coffee maker on her own, pulling down her Army printed mug with Best Gran inscribed on the side from the cupboard above. “That’s her personal business...and though I love her more than life itself, I reckon boundaries are probably important.”

“Probably.” Serena huffs a soft chortle to herself, leaning down to kiss Cole’s hand when he offers it up to her, sticky and covered in melon juice. When she sees her partner about to exit the kitchen in
favor of the lounge, “Can we agree on something, Berenice?” When the blond stops to give her
attention, Serena continues, “We take it day by day...and we make certain Cole never feels the same
way our children did...regardless of the outcome of all of this.”

Offering a soft smirk, Bernie gives a subtle nod before answering quietly, “Of course.”
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

Ange Goddard lends her ear to a friend.

After a chance meeting, Bernie enlists the help of a familiar face.

Chapter Notes

I imagine Ange and Bernie would have gotten along pretty well had they been given the opportunity to work with one another. So, let's pretend they do.

Nearly 2 weeks since the last chapter. Cole is 35 weeks old.

Bernie stands just outside the ambulance entrance, on a metal bench near the memorial garden, sipping her coffee. Gray zippered sweatshirt wrapped around her slim frame. She lifts a hand to tuck a piece of her messy hair behind her ear, rest of it pulled back. It’s obvious her mind is elsewhere as she watches the people around her within the car park.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Ange Goddard lowers herself next to the woman, offering a kind smile, cup of coffee in her own hand. “Saw you sneak out here. If I’m bothering you-”

“No, no. You’re fine.” Bernie shakes her head absently, flashing a quick smirk to her coworker. “Just some...things happening on the home front.” She closes her eyes, letting the sun beat on her face. “I believe I may need to take a bit of time off soon.” Bernie shakes her head a little, “I don’t know yet. Idea I’m toying with.”

“Between you and Serena?”

“Things are fantastic between Serena and I. I couldn’t ask for anyone better in my corner.” The blond adjusts her position, folding her leg over the other. The space between them goes quiet before she continues, “Your relationship between you and your daughter seems relatively...solid. Were you always that way?”

“Heavens no.” Ange nearly snorts with amusement. “Not at all. Far from it.” She smirks, “No, it’s always been me testing her boundaries once she hit adulthood. I’d try to do something nice and she’d
be offended, or I’d tell her the truth about a person or situation, and...she’d be offended. Just constantly seemed to find fault in whatever I did.”

“But you moved past it.”

“Well, I mean, yeah. Had to. I learned that I was just... caring too much. ” Ange nods a little, “Can’t really explain it, but...I knew she was going to react however she wanted to and I was better not to continue attempting to bribe her.” She takes a sip of her drink, “With gifts. I’d constantly buy her things or...food, take-away lunch...whatever have you.”

Bernie listens to the woman, wishing it were only that easy. “I used to do that.” She nods slowly, “Whenever I’d come home from a tour. I didn’t know when to stop. I just wanted her to like me.”

“Dom’s told me she thinks the world of you.”

“Well, its-” Bernie shakes her head a little, “she thinks she owes Serena and I, even after we’ve told her otherwise repeatedly.” She finds herself sighing a little, opening her eyes. “I just...I wish all of this hurt she’s going through...I wish I understood it. She’s so conflicted. So incredibly torn. Char goes to her psychotherapist and does what she can there, even going twice a week as of late, but...that doesn’t change things at home.” Bernie absently licks her lips, “Cole’s...perfect and beautiful, but...I know all she sees when she looks at him, even though he’s starting to look quite a bit like my son, is her ex. That whole relationship, all that she went through.”

Ange listens to the woman, “That isn’t fair to you though. I’m sure you and Serena could never have thought this is what married life was going to entail.” She tilts her head to the side, “I mean, you haven’t even had time to do that.”

“I don’t think she wants to be a Mum.” Bernie finally says aloud, shrugging a little. History repeating itself. “A part of her does and she loves Cole more than anything, but the other portion of her...feels this isn’t for her.”

The brunette nods a little, knowing that feeling all too well. “Your grandson is absolutely delightful. Maybe...it’s time to let her do what she needs to and just...focus on him.” Ange offers, “I’m no expert by any means, but...have you tried confronting her? Bit of tough love?”

“It could push her away.” Bernie finds herself biting the inside of her cheek, trying to keep her emotions at bay. “That’s the last thing I’d want...especially after working so hard to mend the
“Then it sounds as if you’re between a rock and a hard place.” Ange gives a sympathetic half smile, noticing someone walking closer to them. “We have company.”

Bernie lifts her head, seeing the familiar, attractive young man walking closer to them, “Dr. Anand, so nice to see you.”

Ryan Anand smiles a little, “Likewise.” He gives a quick nod toward Ange, “I don’t mean to interrupt, but...Is Char okay? I mean...I know it wasn’t exactly...” Ryan pauses, sighing as he shakes his head, embarrassed by his own nervousness, “She doesn’t need to return my texts or anything, but...she’s been on my mind and...last we-”

“You stayed with her when...” Bernie doesn’t need to finish the statement, meeting his eye as he glances away. She isn’t exactly certain why he seems so uncomfortable. “I find it commendable. You didn’t need to do that.”

“I promised her that I would, so I did.”

Ange lifts an eyebrow, staying to herself, but listening intently to the conversation between the two. Only vaguely understanding what they're talking about.

Bernie smiles to herself, nodding slightly, “Fine.” Bernie takes a moment, trying to decide what to tell him, “She hasn’t been on her mobile much lately, but...she could use a friend.” Bernie won’t outright give her daughter up, but hoped he would get the hint.

A subtle smirk lifts the corner of his mouth, “Do you know when she’s available?”

“Well, she isn’t currently working, nor does she leave the house often.” Nor can she be left alone at the moment. “Take that information with a grain of salt.” Bernie wouldn’t admit that she actually liked this young man. She definitely wasn’t about to admit that she wouldn’t mind if he was involved with her daughter, but it was theirs business.

Ryan begins to grin, “Thank you, Ms. Wolfe...Ms. Goddard.” The other woman seems shocked that he knew who she was as she gives a quick smile, but her reputation and scandals precede her.
“He’s quite fit. Paramour of your daughter’s?” Ange questions, taking another sip of her coffee.

“Something like that.”
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

Charlotte receives help from a knight in shining armor.
Sometimes, a friend is all one needs.

Chapter Notes

Only a couple hours after the last chapter.
Things are about to happen in terms of love for quite a few couples around here.

Charlotte pulls her covers over her head when she hears the knock at her bedroom door. Why is Serena knocking? Another knock. Mum maybe? Yet another. She groans, getting out of bed finally, clad in an oversized jumper and boyshort fit underpants. Just comfortable and careless. “Why are you-” She begins, stopping once she opens the door fully. “Mr. Anand.”

“She’s cut off by her sudden lips pressed against his own.

“Ms. Wolfe.” Ryan offers her a cordial smile. It’s later in the day, but not terribly late. Nearly dinner time. “I’ve missed you and...even if you don’t want to date me or whatever, I just want you to know that I’m here for you and-” He’s cut off by her sudden lips pressed against his own.

Finally breaking their kiss after a moment, Char looks at his eyes, as if scanning them. This is a dream or a delusion. It’s something. “Why?” She whispers after a few moments of just standing in front of him.

“I don’t know.” He shakes his head a little, amused slightly by her initial response to him, “honestly, I can’t stop thinking about you and I want you to know that...I want to help you any way that I can, but...you shouldn’t be locking yourself in your room-”

“It wasn’t locked.”

“with the lights off and curtains drawn and...just...shutting yourself away.” Ryan smirks ever so slightly, “You’re too amazing of a person to let something like this get the best of you.” He doesn’t try to enter her space, doesn’t try to push her into anything, just standing there and telling her what he knows to be true. “And we can...take Cole to the park or...go for a walk...” Ryan shrugs, “whatever
you want...without anything expected in return on my part. Just to get some fresh air.”

“Men always want something in return.” Charlotte backs up, turning back into her room, but leaving the door open. She tilts her head for him to follow behind her, “it’s in your nature.”

“That’s quite the overgeneralization, Ms. Wolfe.”

“I’ve yet to find it false, Mr. Anand.”

“Because you weren’t with a man, you were with a coward posing as a man.” Ryan glances around her room, taking note of the photographs on the wall of she with her parents, all three of them. Only a few of Cole. He doesn’t draw attention to it, but it does make him curious.

Cowards. The choice of words makes her nearly flinch, but she catches herself. “Why, then? Why are you offering to be so kind without-”

“Just to be kind!” He holds his hands out exasperatingly before placing them onto his hips after a moment, “Bloody hell. If you don’t want me romantically, that’s fine, but let me...just be a friend to you. We all could use some friends.”

Charlotte swallows, “but I want you more than just friends.” She nods slowly, “That’s the part...That’s the part that’s adding a bit of frosting to this mentally unstable cake.” She clears her throat, “I do, Mr. Anand, I...really, really like you. I’m just...waiting for the other shoe to drop, honestly.” Char pauses, her eyes glassy, “You’re too good to be true.”

“Then we take things at your pace. Whatever it takes to help you...because there’s something about you that...overwhelms my senses.” Ryan tilts his head to the side, glad he was able to find the word he needed, “I even mentioned you to my Dad. Not my Mum, of course, because-”

“What would Gary think?” A smirk flashes across her face, watching as he chuckles. “Okay then...I guess, I guess we’re doing this, yeah?” Char folds her arms across her chest and it’s almost as if something clicks in her head, Ryan’s certain he is able to see it on her face.

“You and Cole...I promise to do my best to tend to your both in all the ways that matter.” Ryan starts to smile, wanting to hold her, but knowing she needs to be the one to guide this ship, “If you’ll allow me to, of course.”
“I haven’t...been very-” Charlotte shakes her head a little to herself, “attentive to him as of late. I keep...looking at him and seeing his father, and he doesn’t even really look like Anders, but...” She glances away, just standing there, “I’m working on it.”

“He looks like you, Char. Not your ex or even Cameron, you. I mean,” Ryan motions to a photograph of Cole on the wall, it’s of the babe with Bernie, asleep on the sofa together. “You look exactly the same when you’re asleep. Exactly. Maybe Cameron a bit, but only because the two of you look like your Mum, the blonde one.” He shrugs, “It’s genetics.”

She nods a little, “I wish it was something that easy for me to change, but...I’m working on it with my therapist.” Charlotte glances to the man, “Are you staying for supper?”

“I can if you’d like me to.” Ryan shrugs, “I was going to get take-away and head home, so...it would be a massive improvement I’d bet.”

“I haven’t cooked in weeks...well...” She quickly motions to her bandaged finger with a wave in the air, “Tried for a cake, but it didn’t go so well.” Char huffs a soft chuckle to herself, “I think all the meat or whatever I had in there is bad at this point, actually. Would you want to pop to the shops with me? We wouldn’t be terribly long.”

“Are you going like that?” He raises an eyebrow, smirk on his face, “Not that I mind in the slightest, but...”

“I gather I smell a bit.”

“Only slightly.” Ryan watches as she starts to laugh, “I’d offer to scrub your back, but your Mum, the silver one, is home and might feel a bit left out.” He watches as her chuckle grows even harder, “I’ll be downstairs when you’re ready.” He smiles to himself a little as he exits the room, closing the door behind himself. Ryan pauses in the hallway, shooting a triumphant fist in the air, glad she’s finally giving him the chance. The young man bounces down the stairs, unable to keep a smile from his face as he glances into the lounge space.

Serena tilts her head to the side when she sees the young man in the doorway, “I assume things worked out in your favor?” A sly smirk on her face, quickly glancing over when Cole propels himself across the hardwood floor in his walker. “You’re going to hurt yourself.” She calls out after him, only to hear a belly laugh from the babe.
“He’s looking much better than when I last saw him.” Ryan walks in more, watching the boy zip around before glancing back to Serena, “I spoke with her, yeah. She’s invited me to dinner, but says we need to stop at the grocer first.” He uses his hand to motion toward the door as he speaks, “Did you want to come along or we could take him if you’d like a moment of peace-”

“Oh, no, no. You two go on ahead. She needs to be out in the world once in a while,” Serena beams, her eyes dampened, “I’m delighted you were able to get through to her, Ryan.”

He doesn’t speak about the tip off Bernie Wolfe gave him earlier in the day, or how he left work a little early for this exact reason. Ryan nods a little, pausing before speaking, “Me too.”
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

Serena is shocked to see Charlotte playing happy family, and tells Bernie of such.

Cole hits a milestone with an unexpected companion.

Bernie pulls up into the driveway of the home she shares with her partner, noticing the extra vehicle out front, “He got right on it, didn’t he.” She says to himself, raising an amused eyebrow when she sees Serena rushing toward her from the front of the house. She unlocks the car door as the other woman climbs into the passenger seat, “Are we making a getaway?”

Serena playfully scowls, “Ryan Anand is in there, playing with Cole on the floor with the blocks. Charlotte is making supper, unable to keep a smile from her face. It’s all happy family in there.” She leans back in the seat, “Something tells me you may have had a hand in that.”

“Me? Never.” Her tone dry, causing her partner to giggle. “So, I take it she was...receptive?” Bernie can’t think of a better word, “to whatever he offered?”

“I don’t know what he offered. He knocked on the door, asked if I minded if he spoke to Charlotte. I gave him directions and he came back down about fifteen...twenty minutes later-”

“I bet he did.” Bernie has a mischievous smirk on her face, feeling a playful hit to her upper arm, “Wolfe irresistibility, Serena, it’s a real thing.”

Serena rolls her eyes, amused by the woman, “Of course it is, darling.” She threads her fingers through Bernie’s, leaning over to press a tender kiss against her lips. “Worked on me, after all.” She blushes, “You have hospital smell still on you.”

“I know...probably because someone stopped me from coming in the house and changing my clothes.” Bernie watches as her partner takes her exit from the car, an amused expression on her face, doing so herself and following behind her into their home. Seeing Charlotte in the doorway, watching what Serena had told her of, Ryan Anand playing on the floor with Cole. She steps in more, placing a gentle hand to her daughter’s lower back.
“He’s standing...on his own...without holding onto anything.” Charlotte’s voice at the softest possible whisper, as not to draw attention to herself. An amazed grin starting to slowly spread across her face.

“There you are. Right there? Strong architectural choice.” Ryan sees the proud look on the babe’s face, as if he has any idea what he’s talking about, “I appreciate the aesthetic, mate.” He notices as the boy’s attention turns toward the door, causing him to do the same. Cole begins to take a few steps toward his mother, excited and unsure of his balance.

Char crouches, holding her arms out for the boy. She takes hold of him tightly once he throws himself into her, finished his short first steps. “That was so good, my sweet boy.” She closes her eyes in the embrace, “My sweet, sweet, brilliant boy.”

“Were those his first steps?” Ryan asks, an innocent, shocked sound to his voice.

“Yes, they were, Mr. Anand.” Serena steps around the young woman, who was crouching just inside the doorway to the lounge, “walking at eight months. I’m...amazed.” She takes a seat on the sofa in front of the television, “Not that I didn’t think he was capable, but...it is still remarkable.

Bernie follows after her, “Char walked at eight months as well. Cameron was the late one. With as lazy as Cole is, I thought for certain he’d take after his uncle and not bother until after his first birthday.” She takes a seat next to her fiance, “I shouldn’t say lazy, that’s not the proper word, mostly...he doesn’t move unless he has a purpose.” She smirks, watching her daughter continue to cuddle her grandson, noticing the drool drip down the corner of his mouth, “He’s really teething-”

“Really teething.” Charlotte murmurs from the doorway, making a quick disgusted face. “Not that I mind, but...no feeding from Mum’s tap anymore.” She motions toward the blocks, “Don’t stop on my account. Get back to your tower.” The boy waits a moment before slowly wobbling back over to the bright colored foam blocks. “Walking...” Her voice marvels, just above a whisper, “I can’t believe it...I mean, it seems like he just started crawling a few weeks ago.”

“Kids are strange...” Ryan smirks, noticing her amused look, “That’s why I treat them for a living.” He watches as she walks away from the doorway to return to the kitchen. He glances over to the women sitting on the sofa. “Am I imposing here? I mean...I’m sure you have a routine-”

“Routines are boring.” Bernie smirks a little, “and my girlfriend. She’s...into a morning one.”
“It’s better than your wake-up-thirty-minutes-before-my-shift-starts-and-race-around-like-a-madwoman routine.” Serena raises an eyebrow, “Besides, it works for me.”

“And mine works for me.” Bernie begins to chuckle incredulously, “I don’t do that all the time, mind you. Only when I’ve a poor time sleeping and don’t feel the need to curl my hair.”

“What, if you don’t mind me asking, Mr. Anand, inspired your visit in the first place?” Serena leans back on the sofa, folding her arms, feeling the need to change the subject, “Not that I’m not thankful to you for getting Charlotte out of bed and on the road to her usual self, but...I know she wasn’t talking to you. Well, I don’t know for certain, but I just strongly doubt it. She was hardly speaking to even us.”

Giving a subtle glance toward Bernie as she turns her head away, he sits up from his spot on the floor. “I uh...I just, really missed her and I was quite worried given our last encounter.” He explains, hoping it will be enough for the woman. Dating the boss’ daughter probably wasn’t his greatest idea, but sometimes things just happen. “The grocer and all, that was her idea.”

“And we’re very thankful.” Bernie interjects, standing from her seat again. She watches as her grandson holds onto the man a little as he stands there with his blocks, but it’s almost as if he doesn’t understand what he’s doing is a huge event for their household.

“Uh-huh. I see.” Serena isn’t stupid. She is able to see right through her partner. “Well, whatever was said or done, I’m sure one of you will bring me up to speed when you find it necessary.” She stands, walking back toward the doorway, “I’m going to see if Charlotte needs any help.”

Of course it makes Bernie feel guilty. Something so subtle and it makes her feel awful. “Shit.” She whispers to herself.
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

Serena doesn't like to be lied to.

Bernie has trouble letting the past go.

“You know, I can’t believe-” Bernie stops herself, slowly undoing the clasp of her leather wristwatch. She turns to face her partner, who she can feel watching her, “Can’t believe Cole standing on his own today...walking...it seems so fast.” She pauses when the other woman doesn’t respond, “Something on your mind?”

“You lied to me.” Serena leans back against the headboard of the bed they share, her arms folded against her chest and still dressed in her casual clothes from earlier in the day. “Seemingly, you thought nothing of doing so.”

“Serena, I-”

“About something so trivial. It was obvious that you had spoken to Ryan Anand earlier in the day. He wouldn’t have just ventured over here on his own fruition. He would have sought permission from one of us.” Serena explains, not taking her eyes from watching her partner, even though the blonde turns away, “I don’t know what you told him in order for him to come over, or if you gave him some sort of monetary compensation.”

“You’re right.” Bernie awkwardly keeps her arms at her sides, earning a surprised look from the woman in front of her, “You’re absolutely right. I was on a coffee break, getting some fresh air. He asked me how she was doing...told me he was worried about her.”

“What if she didn’t want that?” Serena furrows her brow slightly, “It was a one night stand and suddenly they’re-”

“Maybe it was more than that, Campbell.” Bernie rounds the bed, taking a seat on the edge of her side. “You only know one side of the story. That’s the side Charlotte was willing to tell you. You and I both know how she is with this type of thing...with emotions and uncomfortable topics, such as love interests.”
“Anders Hero wasn’t a love interest as long as I’ve grown more familiar with Charlotte.”

“It was to her though.” Bernie sighs a little, “which...I hate.” Her eyes glassy as she glances away from her partner, “I hate that she gave that man so much of herself and he never appreciated it in return. Even in death, he still causes her to question herself at every turn and even feel indebted to him.”

Serena leans her head back, knowing her partner is right about this. “She’s like you in that respect. Not liking to deal with *emotions and uncomfortable topics.*” A slight smirk plays at the corner of her mouth. “I just don’t want her rushing into something because he’s handsome and successful.”

“And neither do I. However, that’s something between them...that I can’t pinpoint.” The blonde shakes her head a little, “You know, Cameron told me that he waited for her while Hero was dying. Just...waited in a chair near the room for hours just in case she needed him. Which...is incredible for someone to do in the first place, but...a stranger? A one night stand to never speak with ever again? That seems unlikely.”

She didn’t know all of that. Just that the young woman had been with him for a night and he brought her home the next day. Serena sighs a little, “I don’t want to see her hurt again either.”

“Agrreed.” Bernie swallows, “I’ll never forgive myself for all of that...all that happened before.”

“I know.” Moving closer to her partner, she adjusts herself to sit next to the blonde, “I know you don’t believe it when you hear it, but it wasn’t your fault.” Serena gently takes her girlfriend’s hand in her own, holding it tenderly, “That’s something you’re going to need to work on yourself though.” She glances over, taking in the profile of the woman she loves, “I’m here to help you, but I reckon it’s probably more a mind over matter sort of thing with you.”

Nodding absently, Bernie exhales slowly. “I want Charlotte to feel as happy with someone else as I feel with you.” She answers after a few moments, “I want her to know love without hurt...without pain...” She clears her throat, feeling it clouding with emotion. “I believe Ryan Anand is the one to do that for her...because I think it was love at first sight for the both of them.”

“Bit of that Wolfe irresistibility?”

Bernie flashes a brief, amused smirk, “Something like that.”
Serena nods, humming her approval. She pauses for a second, “I’m sorry I was cross with you.”

“I should have told you about my conversation with him.” She lies back a bit, her head coming to rest on her partner’s lap. Bernie shrugs, “I just told him that she needed a friend.” Her voice is more quiet. “She’s so used to cutting herself off, or being cut off against her will...and I think she still does it without realizing it.” Bernie’s jaw clenches sightly, “I know what she’s going through. I’ve...ruined quite a few friendships in my day...in one way or another. I know that, sometimes, it’s more comfortable being without.”

She feels a sense of sadness for her partner. Knowing it was something Bernie did often, especially before she was out of the closet. She can be friendly, though rare, it’s usually backed with a sense of sarcasm. Something to protect herself from possible hurt. Serena tilts her head to the side, looking into her partner’s eyes as she starts to run her nails through the blonde’s hair. “I’m thankful you’ve lightened up about it.”

“Me too.” Bernie gives a closed mouth half smile, watching up to her silver haired lover, “I’ve even gotten to be friends with Ange Goddard...which is saying quite a lot, as I understand. Two miserable old cows like us.”

Raising an eyebrow, Serena gives a quick huff of amusement. “Oh? Opening yourself up to someone new, are we?”

“We each have our own baggage and we’re both very comfortable not speaking about it for the most part.” Bernie nods a little, “Works out better that way. She does, however, ask about Cole regularly. I don’t mind discussing him in the least...or showing pictures.”

“Look at you, big macho army medic getting all soft.” Serena finally starts to half giggle, noticing Bernie’s definite blush, paired with a grin.

“I’m just a very proud grandmother.”
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

Jason asks hard hitting questions of Charlotte's new boyfriend, much to Serena's chagrin.

Chapter Notes

Not too long after last chapter.

Ryan lifts his head, watching as the porter brings in a very worried young girl, having just had an x-ray on a very broken leg. “Bed four should be good, mate. Thanks for bringing her back up. We’ve been a bit...harried today. School bus accident and ED thought it best just to send the children here instead of me going there as a consult.” He sighs a little to himself, shrugging, “but what can you do. They’ll be treated regardless.”

Jason furrows his brow, taking the girl to the bed and letting the nurses help her back to it before he returns to the nurses’ station where the man is still standing, “Are you Mr. Anand?”

Raising an eyebrow, Ryan nods a little. He looks at the porter’s name badge, “Jason, is it?” He pauses, recognizing his face from photographs around Serena Campbell’s home, “Oh, you’re Charlotte’s brother. Right?”

“Not exactly, no.” Jason watches him, “Cousin by impending marriage, but my daughter refers to her as her aunt. Greta, my wife, says it’s complicated.”

He starts to smile a bit, offering his hand, “Pleasure to finally meet you.”

Jason looks down at the hand being extended to him, considering it for a moment before placing his hand into it and relaxing his face. “Likewise. Do you prefer Mr. Anand or Dr. Anand?”

“I’d prefer Ryan, if that’s okay.”
Nodding, Jason gives him a slight smile. “Charlotte must really like you.”

“Well, I really like her.” Ryan nods, taking the tablet computer offered to him from a passing staffer, containing various test results.

“Do you plan to marry her someday?”

“We’ve only just...”

“Because I knew on my second date with Greta that I would ask her to be my wife. Not by that term, but I wanted to make sure she was safe and cared for. Forever.” Jason watches the man still, “We weren’t dating for very long when she became pregnant. Do you want children?”

“Maybe someday. Charlotte already has Cole and he seems like a proper cool little chap.” Ryan attempts to diffuse the situation, “I’m sure that won’t be for a while yet though.”

“But if it were to happen?”

He starts to walk away from the desk, unsurprised when the young porter follows behind him, set on continuing the conversation. “If it’s ever an issue, I’m sure we would discuss our options. I’d support whatever she decided to put her body through.”

Jason purses his lips, curious, “Even if that means termination?”

“It’s her decision.” Ryan nods slowly, “Again, I’d stand by her regardless of what she chooses.” He pauses just before pulling back the curtain next to his patient, “Listen, Jason, I really like Charlotte. Really like her. However, thinking about dramatic what-ifs before they’re actually something we need to worry about...quite honestly, is a waste of time. I’d rather spend that time with her and Cole...just living our lives.”

“Do you think he’ll call you his Dad someday?”

“If my relationship with Char gets that far and he wishes to, I wouldn’t stop him.” Ryan returns to the desk suddenly, reaching over to obtain a small, blank notepad. “It seems you have a great many
Jason nods, “I want to ensure that you’re a proper suitor for her.” He watches the man for a moment, “The last one was...very dangerous.”

“And you wouldn’t want that to happen again. I totally understand.” Ryan smiles to him, offering him the notepad, “I want you to write down every single question you can think of that you might have for me. No topic is too sacred and I’ll answer them to the best of my abilities.” He pauses, raising an eyebrow, “That way you’ll have time to really think about each one of your questions. You can give it back to me when we meet up for Sunday dinner. Does that sound feasible enough?”

He offers a pleased smile toward the man, taking the notepad from him and shoving it into his back pocket, “Quite feasible. Thank you.”

“No problem.” Ryan releases a breath he wasn’t aware he was holding, watching as the younger man walks away. Hopefully he handled that situation well enough.

Having made his way back onto the elevator, Jason steps off again on the AAU level. Quite proud of himself and what little information he was able to already obtain. Spotting his aunt in her office, he knocks on the door before pushing it open, “Auntie Serena, good afternoon.”

“Hello, Jason. Slow day?” Serena glances up from filling out a report on her computer, “That’s the only reason I can think of for you popping over here.”

“I just met Charlotte’s boyfriend.” Jason answers matter-of-factly.

“Oh?” Serena raises an eyebrow, doing everything in her power not to pull out the bottle of shiraz she keeps in the lower drawer of her desk, feeling like she may need it for this conversation. “How did that go?”

“I have many questions for him.” He removes the small notepad from his back pocket, “His name is Ryan and he gave me this to write down my questions. He said he would answer them all.” Jason nods, “He’s taller than I imagined he would be. Charlotte is tall like Auntie Bernie. That’s good for her.”

“Well, height is definitely a major factor in any relationship.” She replies sarcastically in a nonchalant
manner, bringing her nails to her temple to run through her own hair. “Why were you asking him enough questions that he’d offer you a notepad?”

“I need to make sure he’s a proper choice in companions for her.” Jason nods, “I asked him what he would do if he were in the same predicament as Greta and I-”

“Predicament?”

“If Charlotte became pregnant not very long into-”

“Please, tell me you didn’t.” Serena closes her eyes a little, bringing her hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache starting to form.

“I have many questions.” Jason watches her, “They’re to ensure that she’s taken care of...and that he wouldn’t want to hurt you...like her last partner did.” His voice trails slightly at the end.

Serena feels a bit silly now, it never occurred to her. She stands, moving over toward him and carefully wrapping her arms around the young man for a moment before holding him at arm’s length. “I don’t believe that’s anything you need to worry about with Ryan Anand. He stands to lose far more than I do if he ever tried to hurt me.” She moves her face to meet her nephew’s eyes, “Not to mention, Bernie likes him, which is saying quite a bit. She hardly likes anyone.”

Jason seems to relax a bit, “Okay.” He nods a little, “I’m still going to write questions for him to answer.”

“I’d expect no less of you, Jason.” Serena continues to rub his upper arm, never thinking of how he might worry about her. Never really remembering how distraught he was when she was injured in the first place. Even before he saw her stitches and bruises. “I know you’ll think up smashing ones.”
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

We're doing a bit of wedding ensemble discovery in a specialty shop. It isn't going well.

Cole is 38 weeks old.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, for all your comments and whatnot. I love to get them. I'll always respond independently, but it means a bunch to me as a whole.

“Give us a twirl.”

“Seems pointless.” Bernie does so anyway, standing on the pedestal, surrounded by mirrors in the bridal studio. “Nothing really sways when one is wearing trousers.” She doesn’t turn to look at herself, keeping her eyes on her daughter sitting in front of her. “Do they look okay?”

“Mum, you look beautiful.” Charlotte grins a bit, glad Cole is asleep in his pushchair during all of this as it seems to be taking forever. She doesn’t mind in the least, but knows Cole would.

“Absolutely gorgeous.”

“You’ve said that about the previous four ensembles.”

“And I’ve meant it.” The young woman raises her eyebrows innocently as she folds her arms across her chest, “Which one are you most comfortable in?”

Bernie sighs a little, mumbling, “All of them.”

“Okay. Are you like...going to take this seriously?” Char sits up a bit straighter. “You lot set a date before even having any sort of idea what you’re going to do. All you give me is, something small. It’s absurd.” She exhales slowly, “Not that I mind, though. Bit of a challenge...and gives me something to do while the two of you are working...besides dealing with this feral boy of mine.”
“Cam was the same way. Sorry for your luck.” Bernie smirks slightly, amused. Glancing down at herself, “What about that tea-length from earlier?”

“Really? I only had you try that on so I could snap a picture and cherish the memory that you were willing to be even the slightest bit girly.” Her face softens a little, “Why not choose that and a pair of trousers? You would be able to change it up if you wanted. Neither are particularly expensive...well, not for our blood.” She tilts her head to the side, “One for the ceremony and one for...a dinner or something after?”

Bernie finds herself exhaling slowly, finally turning to look at herself in the mirror. “You know, when I married your father, it was...sudden.” She swallows, smoothing a hand down her lapel, “I thought it was the right thing to do...and I suppose it was at the time.” A sad smile begins to spread across her face, “I was terrified. I felt alone. Marcus was...absolutely thrilled to pieces. He was getting the family he always wanted. I thought...I was doing what I had to do and I’d get comfortable with time.”

Charlotte stands, moving to stand behind her mother. “You were. It was a different time then. You wouldn’t be the woman you are today had it not been for your time with Dad. You’d have never met Serena. You’d have never had me...your favorite child, you’d have been stuck with just Cam...which is disappointing to say the very least.”

It garners a chuckle from the older woman, “It’s...a really good feeling to finally be doing this with someone I really, truly love... because I love them. Not because of society’s expectations or demands.” Bernie licks her lips in thought, “I want nothing more than to secure our family as just that...a family. You, Cameron, and Jason with Greta. Cole and Guinevere. We’re family. Our little mishmash...it works for us.”

Furrowing her brow ever so slightly, Charlotte lowers her arms from their fold, “Did something happen?”

“No, everything is fine.”

Char rolls her eyes, knowing her mother would never be willing to speak about her feelings. “Okay.”

Bernie clears her throat, “Just our family...and maybe a few of our friends and a few friends to this wedding. No more than twenty to thirty people tops.”
“See? That helps. Now I can narrow down the possible venue list.” Charlotte offers her mother a soft smile, waiting a moment before speaking again, “I’m really thrilled that this is all finally coming to fruition.” She nods, “With Serena’s anxieties and...whatever that is that you don’t want to talk about, it will probably be a relief once all is said and done.”

“Quite right.” She steps down from the pedestal. “Let me get out of this.”

Char turns when she hears Cole’s calls of *Ma* from his place in his pushchair just behind her. “Good idea, the beast awakens.”

Bernie flashes an amused smile as she disappears into the dressing area. She takes another look at herself in the mirror of the room, inhaling and exhaling slowly. She reaches over to her handbag, fetching her mobile from within. She touches the picture of her partner’s face, dialing her.

Serena leans back in her chair, glad it’s her when she glances on the screen to see her girlfriend’s face. “How is shopping going?”

“You get to do this in a couple days.” Bernie mumbles, hoping Char doesn’t hear her. “We should have eloped.”

She hums a soft sound of amusement, sensing her partner’s dread. “Shouldn’t be all that bad. You and Charlotte are going to dinner after all is said and done, aren’t you?” Serena pauses, absently watching through the window at the rest of the ward, “It’s been quite a while since the two of you have spent some quality time together.”

She knows her partner is correct, nodding slowly as if Serena can hear the rattling of her head, “Knowing the both of us, it will probably be a very quiet meal.”

“Oh, don’t say that.” Serena tilts her head to the side, a smirk playing at the corner of her mouth. “You’ve plenty to talk about. Pick her brain about things... *people*.”

“I’m not spending an entire dinner talking about her boyfriend. She will go silent on me.” Bernie rubs a hand over her face, “We live together and I’m nervous about sharing a single meal with my own daughter.” She finds herself mumbling a little, “I’m being ridiculous.”
“You just don’t want to upset her. Upsetting daughters is what we do best.”

“Oh, come on, Campbell.” Bernie attempts to conceal her amusement from her partner’s self-deprecating joke, “I’d rather not, but...I mean...maybe start on about the weather?”

Serena furrows her brow, trying not to laugh, “Yes, because that’s what young, twenty-three year old women like to discuss over lunch.” She sighs a little, “Maybe just let her guide the course of conversation. The two of you could talk about Cole. He’s common ground. Talk about what she plans to dress him in for the wedding...or if there are any hobbies she’d like to get back into. Think outside the box, Berenice.”

“Easier said than done.” She exhales slowly, hearing Cole’s excited footsteps closing in on the dressing room. “I need to go. Love you.” Bernie touches the screen of her mobile, disconnecting the call before being heard. “I’m coming. Having issues with my zipper.” She wasn’t, just something to give her an excuse for taking as long as she has, “Just got it.” She turns, seeing her grandson dipping his head to have a gander underneath her door before climbing under once he sees his grandmother.

“Mum, is he in there with you? I turned for a moment to get something from his bag and he was gone.” Charlotte sounds worried, anxious.

“He’s just helping me.” Bernie calls, replying to her daughter, through the door, with a shrug. “We’ll be out in a moment.” Watching as the boy makes his way to the full length mirror, just investigating himself. She makes short work of dressing in her skin tight jeans and vintage, plain colored tee. A pair of bright white plimsolls. Comfortable, easy. That’s what she wanted her wedding ensemble to display too, regardless of all the things she tried on today. “Cole, are you ready?”

“B-b.” Cole’s raspy voice mumbles, attempting to get his grandmother’s attention by pointing at his own reflection, “Gam, b-b.”

“I see.” Bernie smirks to herself, the boy was growing more and more vocal over the past few weeks. Giving him a moment, and herself one as well for a breather, “Are you hungry?” The question instantly garners her grandson’s attention and she lowers herself for him to run into her arms. “I’ll be glad when all this wedding stuff is over.” She checks for her handbag, then remembers that her daughter was keeping watch over it. "Nan and I should have eloped, Cole."
Chapter 101

Chapter Summary

After picking Ric's brain about his past marriages, Serena admits her own reservations.

Bernie tends to her drunk partner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Serena takes a sip from her glass of Shiraz as she leans back in her office chair, “Did you ever elope?” She raises an eyebrow as she glances to her friend in the desk opposite her. They weren’t usually in at the same time anymore. It worked better for the department if they staggered a bit, but not so much for their friendship. “Married six times, but...did you ever elope with any of them?”

Ric pauses, thinking to his previous wives, “Almost. The one that got away, so to speak. She was nearly my first marriage. Might have even been my only if we had a chance.” He offers a sad, closed mouth smile. “She was lovely. Bright blue eyes, golden hair. Her parents didn’t like me because I was black. She was ready to abandon them, but I wouldn’t let her. We were far too young anyway.” His smile broadens slightly, “You and Bernie thinking of it?”

She shrugs a little, “She...She really wants to. I know the kids are so excited in the festivities.” Serena takes another sip, “The last thing I would ever want is to disappoint them.” She falls quiet for a moment, “Am I being silly?”

Shaking his head slowly, Ric leans forward onto his desk, “I think the two of you should do what makes you happy, not what makes everyone else happy.”

“Easier said than done.” Serena replies softly, bringing a hand up to quickly wipe a tear she can feel forming in her eye. “I just wish Elinor was here...who knows, though, if she would even want to be a part of my ceremony.”

“Of course she would.” Ric stands, putting some papers away in a nearby filing cabinet.

“She made it very clear that she wasn’t comfortable with the idea of Bernie and I before she died.” She swallows, swirling the wine around in her glass slowly, “which I don’t understand in the least. We didn’t raise her to be that way. At least, I don’t believe we did.”
He sighs softly, turning to face her after a moment. “It was new to her. That’s all. I highly doubt a child of yours could be homophobic. She would have come around in due time.” Ric watches his friend, “You had said Christmas went well when all the children were together. She didn’t seem to be bothered then.”

“A blood test was administered when she...” Serena thinks about her daughter’s demise often, especially when she’s slightly intoxicated, “and when it came back positive for cocaine, everything just...made sense. Her abnormal behavior made sense.”

“Right...meaning the behavior she displayed in regards to you and Bernie was...not really her.”

Serena begins to nod slowly, “Do you think that’s why I’ve been...dragging my feet, so to speak?”

“If I were a betting man, and I am, I’d put my money on it.” Ric sits on the edge of the desk, “It’s completely understandable though. Probably something you should talk to Bernie about. She’s a very understanding person, especially when it comes to you. If you want to just remain engaged, I don’t think she would argue against that either.”

“I do want to marry her.” She takes another sip, “I’m just...conflicted with the means.”

“Because Elinor won’t be there?” He exhales when she shakes her head negatively, “Well, I’m out of my depth now...”

“Well...part of it, I suppose. Bernie was adamant that if we had something with our family present, that she would be represented, but...it still isn’t her. She won’t be there to hold my flowers or...in any photographs.” Serena lifts a hand up to wipe away a stray tear that has escaped the confines of her eye, “and I feel guilty celebrating anything. I’ve gone to years of therapy to work on my grief and I still feel bloody guilty when I’m happy.”

Ric listens to his friend, “the drinking doesn’t help.” When she lifts her head to look toward him, he continues, “You’re a touch depressed, which is absolutely normal. I’d expect you to be. I was when my son died years ago and I still grow melancholy from time to time. We are parents and we love our children...regardless of what they think of us or where they might be.”

“Yeah.” Serena nods a little, “I think you’re right.” Her head lifts when she hears a soft knock on the door.
“Am I interrupting?” Bernie pokes her head in, then notices the wine on her partner’s desk. “Tough day, I take it.”

The silver haired woman begins to smirk, “Something like that. Care for a glass before we head out?”

Shaking her head negatively, Bernie steps in more, closing the door behind herself as she takes a seat on the bench beneath the window. “You’ve the overnight shift now, Griffin?” She leans against the back of the bench.

“It made sense.” Ric nods, “I’m only on until about five. Sanders takes over until eight or nine, depending when our Director comes in.” He hears a low chuckle from the woman he’s mentioned. “Now, for you to convince Ms. Campbell to get out of here. I have to give my staff their assignments and I have two who I need to start review reports on.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” Serena calls playfully, standing from her desk chair.

Bernie grins a bit, then gives a quick glance over to their friend, who seems to be shaking his head toward her. Signifying there’s something else. She doesn’t ask him outright. Deciding to speak to her partner when they arrive home instead.

With the car ride uneventful, Serena is thankful that she and Bernie decided to carpool today. “I was going to ask if you wanted to head over to Albie’s for a few hours, but you seemed too...set on coming home.” She says with a relatively quiet tone once they pull up to the house.

“You could have asked. I wouldn’t have minded, but...you looked tired. I didn’t want to push you.” Bernie lies. Well, maybe not a lie. Serena does look tired, but she brought her here because Ric thought they should probably talk. “Are you okay?”

Serena licks her lips, glancing over to her partner. “Let’s head in?”

“Serena, you can talk to me, you know. You always seem so afraid to talk to me anymore.” Bernie answers quietly, “I want to help you with things. If it’s something that includes me, I want to better myself or...act differently so that I can better—” She isn’t able to finish the sentence, Serena is already heading out from the car, walking up toward the house. Bernie follows behind her, “Serena—”
She still doesn’t answer, pushing the door open after unlocking it. It is quiet... suspiciously quiet. The lights off except for the dim light over the stove which can be seen from the foyer near the front door. Serena swallows, walking in the direction of the kitchen, seeing a handwritten note. *Mum.* She wants to grab it, rip it open. However, this isn’t for her.

“I was talking to-” Bernie follows Serena’s line of sight when she notices her staring. She walks in more, unfolding the paper sitting on the kitchen island once she takes hold of it. Bernie starts to smirk, reading from it, “*Dinner is in the fridge with instructions. It’s been a while since the two of you have had a night to yourselves in your own home. Cole and I are staying the night over Ryan’s and will be back tomorrow. I hope that’s enough time for your tantric wild-”* Bernie lifts her head up, nearly about to laugh, but wanting to see her partner’s face. However, no one is there. She’s alone on the ground floor and, as if on cue, she hears the bedroom door upstairs close. Exhaling slowly, she whispers to herself, “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: I don’t know the means of ANY of Ric’s marriages. I’ve attempted to research them, but information comes few and far between with the most being about Lola. I made up the woman he speaks of in this particular story just to give him something to resonate on with Serena.
Chapter 102

Chapter Summary

Upon learning they have the house to themselves, Bernie is surprised when Serena gives in to her impulsive behavior.

Chapter Notes

Same night as the last chapter.

Bernie pushed open the bedroom door, seeing her partner, still clad in her lightweight trench coat, curled on her side in the middle of the bed. “Campbell, what’s wrong?” She doesn’t receive an answer, but remains in the doorway, “Gibraltar.” She says suddenly, her voice deep, filled with confidence.

It wasn’t something that Serena was expecting. She furrows her brow, “What?”

“Let’s go to Gibraltar. Charlotte isn’t home tonight. We’re alone. Let’s...go to Gibraltar.” Bernie nods, slowly folding her arms across her chest, “We have three days together. We were going to spend it at home doing things about the house and you were going to go dress shopping with the girls, but...screw it. Let’s go to Gibraltar for a couple of days.” She shrugs, “this is taking a lot out of us and...let’s just go.”

Of course she would offer that. “I...” Serena clears her throat, pushing herself up to a sitting position, “I was going to tell you that I didn’t think I could marry you and...now you’re here telling me that you want to go to Gibraltar.”

“Because the more time we have to think about things, the harder it gets.” Bernie ignores the first part of her statement, “we can have dinner or a little thing over Albie’s when we get back to celebrate.” She shrugs, “I can always find a place for us. We can get our things together right now and go. We’ll need our passports, birth certificates, our previous marriage and divorce papers—”

“You’ve researched.”
“Of course I have. I don’t decide things on a whim, Campbell. At least not all the time. They were papers we needed to have anyway.” Bernie nods toward the closet door, “There’s a folder on the top shelf to the left.”

Serena feels her eyes are starting to dampen. She stands, going to where she was directed, she carefully opens the door, seeing the subtle, thin black folder exactly where the woman said it would be. She removes it from the shelf, seeing the things her partner said they were going to need, as well as places for them to visit during their stay. “You’ve prepared.” Serena says quietly.

“Yeah.” Bernie whispers, watching the woman, “but if you don’t want to, that’s fine. I would understand. Just know that the papers we need for all of this are-”

“Okay.”

It takes the blonde by surprise and she straightens her posture a bit, “Yeah?”

Serena tosses the binder onto the bed walks closer to her partner, capturing her lips tenderly, “Before I let my thoughts get the better of me again.”

Bernie grins against the woman’s lips, “Get packing. I’ll buy us some plane tickets. How soon do you think we can leave here and be at the airport?”

“Uh.” Serena shakes her head a little, glancing to the closet door again before replying, “I’ve no idea. I’ve never rushed for a flight before...not like this.”

“If you forget something, we’ll buy it when we get there.” Bernie lifts her mobile from her pocket, her finger scrolling a bit before glancing back up to her partner who is still standing before her, “Three hours total once we get to Holby Airport. Plane leaves in two hours.”

“We’re doing this.”

“I’ve bought our tickets.”

Serena slowly begins to grin, chuckling to herself, “We’re doing this.” She says again.
“I told you to get packing.” Bernie tilts her head, watching as the woman rushes into the closet. “Not too much, I don’t expect to be wearing much during our time there.” She calls to her girlfriend, standing in front of the dressing table, opening one of the drawers.

“Berenice.” Serena blushes deeply, glancing around the closet at her useless clothes.

“Do you want me to pack for you?” Bernie smirks, “Also, do you get seasick?”

“Uh...I don’t know. Why?”

“No reason. Just a question.”

Serena pokes her head out from the closet opening, “You don’t ask questions like that without reason. Are you planning on going out to sea?”

“Spoilers, Campbell.” Bernie gets a shirt thrown to the side of her head, causing her to chuckle. “Bring comfortable shoes.” She chooses her gauze-like shirts and trousers, comfortable and breathable, “Have you ever been to Gibraltar?” When she doesn’t receive an answer, she sees the other woman has disappeared into the closet once again. A smile slowly begins to creep across her face, this was going to be very interesting.
Chapter 103

Chapter Summary

Ryan takes care of Cole, without being asked, letting Charlotte sleep.

Upon learning her parents have eloped, Charlotte helps Jason through a tough time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There’s something about Ryan Anand’s flat. Something calming. The smell, maybe? Charlotte doesn’t really know. Picking up his button down shirt from the night prior, she buttons it around herself before stepping into the other room, taking in the sight around her.

Ryan has Cole in a highchair, a portable one that clips to the dining table. The babe feeding himself a scrambled egg with his chubby fingers. The man moves back into the dining area from the kitchen when he hears the boy chanting for his mother. “Mum is still-” He pauses, a smile growing across his face, “no longer sleeping. Good morning.”

“Morning.” Charlotte runs a hand through her messy, dark blonde hair, gladly accepting a welcoming kiss from the man as she folds her arms around herself, “You’re tending to him?”

“Well, yeah. I mean...he woke a few hours ago and I didn’t want him waking you. So we came out here and played some classic Mortal Kombat. He’s quite good at it.” When Ryan realizes she doesn’t seem bothered, “You know, with the blood and guts-”

“He isn’t even a year yet, I highly doubt he cares what he was watching as long as it had fast, moving parts.” Char winks to the man, a smirk on her face.

“I didn’t actually-”

“I know.” She walks closer to her son, “Where’s this seat from?” Char leans down to softly kiss his hair taking note of the high chair that simply clamped onto the table.

“Oh, I picked it up a couple weeks ago...just in case you two stayed over mine sometime.” Ryan shrugs nonchalantly, returning to the kitchen, “Would you like a coffee?”
“What if we never stayed over?” Charlotte smirks when Cole offers her a handful of scrambled egg. “is there cheese in this?” She raises an eyebrow, not really bothered, just amused. She looks to her son, “Did Ryan put cheese in there for you, Cole? He must know about your love of sliced cheese.” When the boy makes sounds that he’s enjoying his meal, she grins a bit more, glancing over to the man who is now in front of her with a mug of coffee.

“Mocha with two extra shots of espresso.” When she gives him a surprised look, Ryan continues, tilting his head toward his kitchen where she sees a home espresso machine. “I’m a coffee snob, but I figure you may like this a bit more.” Placing his hands on his hips when she takes the mug from him, “Would you like some food?”

“I’d like for you to sit down.” Char takes a careful sip from the hot liquid, raising an eyebrow. “This is quite good.”

Ryan smirks a little, leaning over to capture a quick kiss from her lips before doing as was requested, “Did you sleep well?”

She begins to nod slowly, raising an eyebrow, “You?”

“With you next to me, always.” He didn’t. She cries in her sleep, Ryan doubts she knows that. He feels a playful hit against his forearm. “So, what’s the plan for today? Should we go to the park or-”

“Shopping, actually.” Charlotte sighs heavily, “I’ve been so engulfed in wedding planning for my parents that I’ve neglected to get myself anything. I’ve hardly anything for the summertime.” She shakes her head a little, “I’ve shopping with Serena tomorrow and I know what I’m going to be met with. They’re both so incredibly indecisive about this.”

“Did you want to text them? Check in?” He stands again, obtaining her mobile from the charging post near the kitchen. Ryan sets it in front of her before returning to his seat. “You know how they are. Just let them know you’re okay.”

“I left them a note yesterday.” She lifts her mobile anyway, her brow furrowing when she notices a text message from her mother. Char stands, reading from the message aloud as she walks about the room slowly, “Though we are thankful for everything you’ve done for us in regards of this life stage, we’ve decided to elope. Spur of the moment, but it works best for the both of us. We should be back within three days time. Much love. Mum xx.” Charlotte lifts her head, looking toward the man, “They’ve bloody eloped.”
“Good for them, where to?”

“No, not good for them.” Char runs a hand through her hair, “I don’t even know where they are.”

Ryan notices her change in disposition, “You okay?”

“I thought...this was the thing I could do to repay them for all they’ve done for me. This was it.” Charlotte nods, throwing her mobile into the sofa. “I’m back to square one. I’m...I come here with you for one night and they run off. Run off like a couple of teenagers.”

“Ms. Wolfe, they’re having the wedding they want. You have to find that commendable.” He attempts to explain, “I’d only hope the same consideration would be offered when I plan to...” Ryan stops himself, glancing away. He doesn’t know how she’d react with talk of this. He’s never even mentioned it to her. “Right?”

Charlotte had never thought of it that way. She folds her arms behind her head, taking a moment before answering, “I suppose you’re right. I...want nothing more than for the both of them to be happy.” She smirks a little, “I know...my Mum just had to pretend she was for so many years when she was with my Dad. That’s why she kept going away to serve, she had a woman she fancied there...it wasn’t the prospect of caring for me or Cam. Which has taken me many therapy sessions to realize.” Char inhales slowly before exhaling the same way, “I’d want the same thing too, I think. Take a holiday and just...do everything all together. Get it over with and...have a nice honeymoon at the same time, you know?”

Ryan slowly starts to grin as he listens to her, “Yeah, I do.”

“Come home...and make a nice dinner for everyone in celebration.” Char’s mind stats to turn its gears and she hears her mobile again, she answers without seeing the identity of the caller. “Hello~” She pauses, “Jason, it’s okay.”

Jason holds his mobile to his ear pacing back and forth in the flat he shares with his family. “It isn’t. I don’t know where they’ve gone. What if something happens to them? I don’t know where they are.”

“Jason, everything will be fine.” She tries to keep her tone even, holding the mobile ahead of her to see that her brother is also phoning. “Blimey, all of you at once. Jason, are you at home? Where is Greta?” Charlotte closes her eyes a moment, listening to him. She’d phone Cameron after.
“Round the shops. I’m at home with Guinevere.” Jason continues to pace.

“How can I when Auntie Serena and Auntie Bernie are missing?”

“They aren’t missing. They just haven’t told us where they’ve gone, but they’re adults and are allowed to do things at the spur of the moment. I know it isn’t ideal, Jason, but I assure you, they will phone us when they get settled. That’s their way.” A month ago, Charlotte would have been just as anxious as Jason. She’s come a long way. Touching the screen of her mobile, she raises an eyebrow, glancing toward her boyfriend.

“Sounds like we’ve our day planned then. Eh, Cole?” Ryan glances toward the babe, egg everywhere, including his hair. He carefully extracts the boy from his seat, “Thirty minutes, let’s get a move on.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s looking more and more like TPTB are going to kill off Bernie as a character (which will earn them a mass exodus from their show, but there you go). Just know that’s never anything you have to worry about here. There will be turmoil and plenty of drama, but nothing like that. TPTB need to come up with something else anytime Catherine wants to go on an extended holiday.

Trust me. Everything will be fine here.
“Are you certain Ryan can be trusted with Guinevere and Cole at the same time?” Jason follows the young woman into his aunts’ home. He carefully glances around, glad to see that everything seems to be in place. “There was no struggle.” He says quietly, confidently.

“The kids are fine and of course there was no struggle, Jason, they eloped. They weren’t kidnapped.” Charlotte notices her opened note on the kitchen island. However, there’s something else there with it. A travel brochure. “They’ve gone to Gibraltar.” She calls out, starting to grin. “Jason.” She calls again.

“Gibraltar.” He stands in the doorway. “A UK territory near Spain, common tourist destination and known for their quick marriage turnarounds. I heard you.” Jason watches her, knowing of the country. “Greta and I considered traveling to Gibraltar for a short amount of time after I asked for her to marry me, but it would have ruined my schedule.”

“Understandable.” Charlotte nods, nearing him. “Does this help a bit?”

“I tried phoning both Auntie Serena and Auntie Bernie while we were in the car and they didn’t answer. I believe Auntie Serena’s mobile is turned off because it went directly to voicemail. Auntie Bernie’s mobile didn’t buzz enough times.” Jason points out, his mobile in his hand.

“She hit the sod off button.” Char smirks a little, shrugging. “Don’t take any offense to it. I’m betting they’re rather busy while on holiday.”

“Doing what?” Jason cocks his head to the side slightly.

She pauses, raising an eyebrow, “Oh, well...you know...seeing the sights.” *Wild tantric sex.*
Charlotte folds her arms, “Shall we send them a pic with the two of us looking very cross?” She removes her own mobile, figuring they’d be more likely to look at her texts than Jason’s since he phoned often and she didn’t. When the young man nods, she moves closer to him, holding her mobile up for a selfie.

Serena stands on the balcony of their premium suite. She closes her eyes and tilts her head toward the sky, her arms spread out, taking in the fresh sea air and the warm sun. “Berenice, I don’t know how you pulled this off in such a short amount of time. This is all just so...so perfect.”

“Thought you’d like it.” Bernie gives a quick glance to her mobile, smirking a little as she gets the photo from Charlotte and Jason as well as a small text, Next time just tell us where you are going. Jason did not take it well. She sends back a heart emoji before setting her mobile on the bedside table. They had, essentially, the penthouse suite of the hotel. It was elaborate and quite expensive, but it didn’t matter to Bernie. She stands, making her way to the doorway, “Now do you see why I didn’t want to spend all the day long shopping in town?”

“Yes, but I’m also not getting married in a swim costume.”

Bernie snorts, “I know, I wasn’t going to force you to do that. The sundress is lovely.” She moves closer to her partner, wrapping her arms around Serena from behind. “Papers have been dropped off, the twenty-four hour wait is on and we have this beautiful view...and a hot tub under the stars without another person in sight...at least not from this angle.”

Serena grins, placing her hand on her girlfriend’s arm, “Have you alerted the children of our whereabouts?”

“They know we aren’t home.” She nods, “Also to leave us alone for a few days.” Bernie places a soft kiss on the woman’s shoulder, “if they attempt to hunt us down, they’ll know when they find it.”

She really doesn’t care at this point. This place is beautiful and she’s with this woman she thinks the world of. “You know, I was going to...” Serena pulls her lower lip into her mouth, biting it a little, “I was ready to give up on this. Not on us, but...the whole marriage thing. I was happy just being engaged to you. We were...comfortable.”

Bernie listens to her, pulling her arms a little tighter. The space going quiet between them, “And now?”
Serena shrugs slightly, “I don’t...I don’t feel like that anymore. I’m...happy. I’m so happy.” Her eyes are glassy, “and...though I’m not a religious person, by any means, I’m not like my mother in that way, I...I feel-” She leans back against her partner, pausing her thought process, “No, it’s not-”

“Let it out, Campbell.”

“I feel Elinor’s...aura. Her approval.” Serena exhales slowly, shaking her head, “I told you that it isn’t-”

“I think it’s a beautiful sentiment.” Bernie nods, letting the woman turn her around in her arms to meet her eyes. It’s almost as if Serena starts to search her face for disbelief, “and I don’t think it’s ridiculous at all, honestly. Maybe, somehow, she’s with us.” She pauses, “Not while we...” It garner’s a blush from the other woman, “but during the other things. Her spirit...her memory, guiding you. That sundress isn’t anything you’d have chosen on your own. Though, I’m sure if it came in a leopard print, you’d have gotten that one instead.”

“Probably.”

“And you seem so much more relaxed here.” Bernie leans forward, capturing her lips, “Doesn’t matter how strange it sounds to either of us, but...I think you’re right.” Another kiss, against the woman’s jaw this time. “Care for a dip in the hot tub?” Another, on the woman’s neck. Bernie brings her hands to her own gauzy top, starting to unbutton it.

“You’re...you’re getting nude out here?” Serena’s eyes widen, a tinge of amusement in her voice, “In the open?”

“Yes.” Bernie stands there, removing her tank top underneath until she’s bare chested. Her hands start on the button of her own trousers.

“What if someone sees you?”

The blonde shrugs dramatically. “I’m here with you. Not with them. We’re going to celebrate us. No one we know is here and I doubt we’ll ever see any of these people ever again. Also, we’re really high up and not close enough to the edge for anyone to really see us unless they’re making an honest effort.” She kicks her pants away, finally nude, “Try it, Campbell. What have you to lose?”
Serena takes in the sight of the woman as she slowly lowers her, still fairly muscular, nude body into the hot bumbling water. Starting to remove her own pieces of clothing, she’s not nearly as much of an exhibitionist as Bernie is. She grins, “I haven’t been nude outdoors since I was a teenager.”

“Well, there’s a story I’d love to hear.” Bernie holds a hand up, helping her partner into the water. “I want to hear everything about you...and we have the rest of our lives to share those stories with one another.” She leans her head back, letting the water ease her tense joints, “We should get one of these at home.”

Humming her approval, Serena takes her partner’s hand in hers, “If you manage to fit it into the garden tastefully, I can agree to that.” Keeping her eyes closed as she tilts her head up again, there isn’t much she wouldn’t agree to at that moment.

Chapter End Notes

Neither of these characters are particularly religious. I don't want to convey as if they are, but I do think Serena has separate feelings, emotions, and beliefs in regards to Elinor which are hard to understand...even for her.
Chapter 105

Chapter Summary

After finally tying the knot, The Wolfes' contact their children to share the news.

Chapter Notes

Extra chapter.

I feel like we need it with the current writing on the walls.

:'(  

“Well...” It’s hard for Bernie to keep a genuinely happy grin from her face as she holds her wife’s hand, exiting the Registry Office. “Serena Wolfe...how do you feel?”

“Euphoric.” Serena answers, shaking her head a little, “I can’t believe you were able to talk me into this, but...I’m so chuffed that you did.” She glows, her face beaming with delight. “I shudder to think what would have happened if things were different...if my anxieties got the better of me as they nearly did.”

Lifting her wife’s fingers to her lips, Bernie softly kisses her knuckles, “Your anxieties don’t scare me, but...I’d have kept trying to convince you.” She leans over, capturing the woman’s lips, “Until the end of time.” Bernie wraps her arms around the woman she loves. “Should we stay an extra day?”

“No, I reckon we’ve stayed long enough.” Serena doesn’t stop Bernie from the public display of affection, which she simply wouldn’t do if they were back home. “Unless you’d prefer-”

“Tomorrow morning should be just fine, wouldn’t you say?”

“I think it would be perfect.” Serena closes her eyes, inhaling the salty air that encompasses the area. She actually loves it. “Let’s...make this an annual occurrence.” She nods, opening her eyes to gaze into Bernie’s, “We travel for our anniversary and stay in some...ridiculously beautiful quarters each time.”
“I’ll go anywhere with you.” Bernie nods, a smirk playing at the corner of her lips, starting to pull the woman along again after she takes her hand, “I think that’s a magnificent idea. Different place each time?”

Humming her approval, Serena falls quiet for a moment, “So, how many phone calls and text messages have you waylaid as to not bother me?” She smirks a little, knowing Bernie all too well, “Whether it be from those at hospital or from the children...”

She raises an eyebrow, removing her mobile from her pocket. Bernie takes a moment touching the screen before she finally offers the picture of Jason and Charlotte appearing cross that they had sent her a day previously. “Jason didn’t take to the news that we left without forewarning, but Charlotte handled it. Cameron sent a ‘WTF Mum’ and that was it.”

Serena gives an amused smile, “Charlotte handled it...we wouldn’t have been able to say that a month ago. Being with a significant other, that truly cares for her, has aided in her healing by leaps and bounds.” She lifts the mobile to eye level, “Let’s send a response, shall we?”

“These women, Cole.” Charlotte sits on the floor, watching as her son plays with one of his toys that has a lot of buttons and switches. “Who is that?” She shows him the photo she’s just received on her mobile.

Cole claps excitedly, moving closer to his mother in an effort to gain more information about the picture of his grandmothers together.

“Should we phone them?” She touches the button for a video call, knowing they’d answer if they saw the boy was with her. He gently lays his head against her shoulder, watching the screen. Char smiles softly, “After this, we can take a nap. How does that sound?” She doesn’t expect him to respond, but hears an affirmative hum in her ear from him.

Bernie swipes her finger across the screen of her mobile to answer, never able to deny her grandson attention. “Hello, you two.” When she sees her grandson excitedly clapping and making some sort of excited sound, it causes her to grin, “Nice to see someone pleased with us.”

Char rolls her eyes, “No one said we weren’t happy for the two of you, quite the opposite. Have you done it already?” She watches as the boy toddles away from her to obtain his pacifier and Serena’s shirt he happened to grab from the laundry Char was doing the night prior, yet again. “Cole, you’re being dramatic. Come here.”
“We have. Took no more than half an hour.” Bernie nods, spotting the boy rubbing Serena’s silk cheetah print blouse against his face as he returns to the view of the camera. “Serena.” She tilts the phone over for her wife to see the boy’s actions.

Serena takes the mobile from her hand as they enter their hotel. She smiles when she sees the boy, “Cole, have you nicked my blouse again?” Seeing his proud smile with his amusement from behind his dummy is really all that mattered. “Charlotte, this place is absolutely gorgeous. Your mother went above and beyond.”

“One of her surprises, I reckon. She did well?”

“You’ve no idea.” Serena pushes her sunglasses to the top of her head, displaying her sun kissed cheeks and nose. “We’ll be home tomorrow afternoon. I trust everything is okay there?” She won’t say that she heard the news of Jason’s reaction. It doesn’t take very long for them to return to their room whilst still making small talk with her step-daughter.

“Absolutely fine. We’re here for when you both decide to come home.” Charlotte smirks, “I’m going to cut this short because the two of you still have a bit of a honeymoon and the two of us are going to nap. Continue to make the most of it and safe travels. We’ll see you both soon and we love you.”

“Likewise.” Serena gives a quick wave with her fingers before disconnecting the call. “You’re lucky that camera was on me. We’ve only just stepped into the room and you’ve taken your trousers off.”

“We’re on holiday and we’re newly married.” Bernie flings herself onto the bed, watching her silver haired wife. “We’re here until morning...and I plan to make the most of it, Mrs. Wolfe.”

Serena begins to nod, slowly removing her gauzy off white cardigan as she nears the large bed. “So, are we both Mrs. Wolfe now or...how does this work exactly?”

Bernie shrugs, “Miss or Missus...it’s entirely up to you. I’m going to continue on with Miss.” She carefully unbuttons her gauzy button-down shirt, smirking as she watches her partner, “You were the one that spoke of wanting to rid yourself of the Campbell moniker even though you’ve made it your own over the years.”

“That I have.” Serena crawls onto the bed, “I’ll be Missus, I think.” She leans down, capturing her wife’s lips again. “You gave them my email for the pictures, correct?”
“And our address, yes, darling.” Bernie leans her head up for another kiss. “I’m on top of it.”

“Good.” She begins to beam, finally thrilled to be married to someone she not only loves, but that she can depend on. Edward was never like that. A different chapter of her life. Yes, she would have loved for her daughter to have been a part of it, but in some way, she feels like she may have been today. *It’s okay to be happy*, a small voice says in the back of her head, and for the first time in a long time, she agrees.
Chapter 106

Chapter Summary

Cameron has some bonding time with his sister, learning Ryan does more for his sister than he thought.

The Wolfe-Dunn children get all sappy welcoming Serena officially to their family.

Chapter Notes

The Wolfe-Dunn kids are sweet sometimes.

Cameron lets himself into his mother’s home. Knowing she wouldn’t be home just yet. He notices the back door open when he hears that the house is silent. Picking his nephew up into his arms when the boy toddles over to him, “I’m sorry, mate, I didn’t bring you anything today.”

“You buy his love.” Charlotte brings the small nicotine vapor device to her lips, not needing to glance over to him to know who it would be.

“It’s for sale and I want it.” He steps closer, “taken up fags again, have you?”

“Never really gave them up, sadly. I have switched to these though. Small, compact...apparently not as harmful, and it tastes of sweet cream. Whatever that is.”

“Cream that is sweet, I reckon.” Cam smirks, of course he’d make that comment. He takes a seat at the garden table near her, watching as the boy moves away. Cole sits outside the very small baby pool with a few centimeters of water, at most, inside. “That’s the smallest baby pool.”

“I know! I mentioned it in passing to Ryan yesterday and it was delivered to my doorstep this morning.” Char smirks, “I was quite impressed. He got right on it.” She motions toward her son, “Saved me the time and effort of going to Asda.”

“But why isn’t he going into the wading pool?”
“There’s little rubber ducks that Ryan sent over as well. He’s all about the splashing...and said rubber ducks.” Charlotte takes another drag of her device, “I’m not complaining.”

Cam raises an eyebrow, “I take it things with Ryan are going well...”

A blush starts to fill Char’s cheeks, “Yeah.” She answers quietly, “Yeah, it is.”

A silence grows between them and Cameron realizes there’s something that is still on his mind, “Are you um...” He clears his throat, running a hand through his hair, “how are you doing, Char?”

Charlotte isn’t entirely certain she’s even heard him correctly as she slowly turns her body to better face him, eyebrow raised, smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth, “You don’t need to ask me that, Cammy.” She’s amused that the thought had even crossed his mind in the first place. “Just to make conversation.”

“I’m asking because I want to know.” Cam swallows, licking his lips and unable to look at her for some reason.

“No, you don’t.”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.” Finally, his head turns to face her. “You were in a rut not too long ago...hardly any time at all has passed and...you’re back to being your old self. The real you. The you before...” Cameron trails off, not wanting to bring up Anders Hero since it was a topic his sister did not need to worry herself over anymore.

Humming that she knows where he’s going with this, Char lifts her legs to a cross under herself. “You were worried about your little sister.” She smirks, amused by how uncomfortable he seems to be growing.

“I’m your big brother and it’s always been my job to look after you and...” Cam shrugs. Over this past year and a half, his amount of guilt has subsided a bit, but not completely. He knows he needs to make it up to her one way or another, even if it’s just asking simple questions about her wellbeing. “Yeah, I guess I was worried about you.”
Char carefully leans across the table, placing a quick kiss to his cheek. “That’s very sweet, Cammy. I’m doing just fine though.” She stands, roughly shaking her hand in his hair, “You need a cut.”

“I beg to differ. Plenty of girls like my hair like this.”

“They’re lying.” Char nods, moving over toward her son.

Pushing through the door, Bernie announces herself to the present company, “I was curious where everyone had gotten off to.” She beams, wearing a white t-shirt with *Just Married* written across it, cropped denim trousers cuffed mid calf, and a pair of boating loafers to finish off the look. She appears to be glowing with bliss...also a tan.

“Welcome home, you nitwits in love.” Charlotte scowls playfully toward her mother, watching as her son takes off in an excited, unsteady sprint toward his grandmother.

Bernie quickly lifts the boy into her arms, grinning when he giggles in her ear as she nuzzles his neck, holding him closely. “Gibraltar was lovely, by the way. Serena is only slightly sunkissed.” She glances back when she hears the door behind her, “Serena, Cole has a pool now.”

Serena is more burnt than Bernie had let on, her nose and tops of her cheeks a dark crimson. “On our honeymoon and she leaves me in the hot tub...without seeing to it that I’ve reapplied sun cream.” She raises an eyebrow, “which she could have very well done herself, but she relocated back inside the room for her own nap.”

“So, two of you on your honeymoon and you decided to take naps?” Cameron furrows his brow.

“They’re proper old, practically pensioners, what do you want from them?” Charlotte moves to stand closer to her brother, watching as Cole then moves over to Serena. “He slept with that shirt of yours last night, by the way. Dragged it all through the house. So...you may not get it back today either.”

“Oh, he can keep it.” Serena smirks, though her face is sore, she doesn’t mind when Cole leans in to give her cheek a slobbery kiss, “It is one of my favorites though.” She begins to yawn.

“Still tired? You slept away your honeymoon.” Cam says incredulously, “don’t you want food or something?”
“I can whip something up, maybe steak sandwiches,” Charlotte pauses, “I’ll even include you, Cammy.”

“Cammy?” Serena bites her lip, obviously amused by the simple nickname.

“Called him that ever since she was small.” Bernie nods, glancing back over to her wife, “I reckon we give Jason a ring. Let him know we’re back, safe and sound-”

“Speak for yourself, you don’t resemble a cooked lobster.” Serena mumbles.

“Neither do you, you’re breathtaking.” Bernie leans over, capturing her partner’s lips. Turning her attention back toward her children, “Cameron, I do hope you’ll be staying for a bit, at least. Charlotte’s steak sandwiches are heavenly. Would there be enough for Jason and Greta if they were to pop round? I believe Jason is off today, if I remember his schedule at all.”

“More than enough. I had bought extra to section off and make salad out of for tomorrow, but I can use chicken breast instead. Not a problem whatsoever.” Char waves her hand a little, “family lunch isn’t a thing I believe we’ve ever done.”

“I don’t know if it’s going to be one now until I phone Jason.” Bernie walks back toward the house.

“Mum, one more thing.” When the woman turns, Cameron continues, “Really, both of you, congratulations. Serena, I speak for Char and myself when I say that we’re really happy to have you as an official part of our family...instead of the two of you living in sin.” He notices the older women give him an amused, yet delighted scowl.

“Also, if you ever try a stunt like that again, we’re sending you both to a care home when you’re older.” Charlotte finishes for her brother, earning a chuckle from the group. “Right, let’s get on with it. Why don’t the two of you stay out here to make your call and you can watch Cole with his new wading pool while I take stock of what I could possibly make as a side for this sudden late family lunch of ours?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Serena sets the boy onto the ground once Char retweets into the house, though he protests a bit, “Show me your pool, Cole. I bet Guinevere is going to have a good time with that as well.” She follows closely behind the boy.
“Did you mean all those things you said?” Bernie takes a seat next to her son at the garden table, when Cam blushes, she ruffles a hand through his hair, “That was very sweet. I thank you for the both of us.”

“Yeah, don’t let too many people know I’ve gone all soft.” Cam smirks, feeling a playful nudge to his shoulder by his mother.
Chapter 107

Chapter Summary

Charlotte worries about introducing her father to her boyfriend.

Ryan and Marcus have a spar of words until Charlotte lays the rules out.

Chapter Notes

Cole is 42 weeks old.

“You’re going to be fine.” Charlotte says quietly, “Just because your mother hated me-”

“Mum didn’t hate you.” Ryan shakes his head a little, “my mother was hoping for me to walk through the door with a burly, muscular leather daddy by the name of Gary. Then you come in. Tall, beautiful...blonde. She wasn’t really expecting that in the least.” He notices her smirk from the corner of his eye as he continues to drive to the house she had given him the address to, “So, what should I expect from your Dad?”

She huffs an amused sound, giving herself a moment to think about what to tell him. “My father
just...wants me to like him at this point. I’ve ignored him quite a few times in the past year and a half. Just...not spoken to him for stretches of time.” Char swallows, nodding slowly, “He’ll bring up my ex often and how he didn’t know, but...I don’t want to talk about that anymore. I’m tired of hearing him say how he didn’t know and...coming up with excuses for his own ignorance in the situation, but I’m over it at this point. I go to my therapist to talk about that stuff, I don’t want to hear it from him and I hear it every bloody time.”

“I’ll change the subject for you.” He reaches over, gently taking her hand in his and feeling as she threads her fingers between his. “Besides, he may not say much with Cole there.”

“Cole hardly even knows him.” It’s obvious this is causing her anxiety to rise.

Ryan pulls the car over on the side of the road and places it into park, “Babe, we don’t need to today.” He shakes his head, looking over to her fully. “Cole’s asleep in the back and you aren’t really feeling up to it.”

“It’s simply a headache.” Char answers quietly.

“You weren’t hungry this morning, either.” He watches her a moment before he continues, “If it’s all just...getting to you, I understand. You shouldn’t stress about this. I don’t really know him, other than a very brief conversation when Cole was poorly in hospital, but your Dad doesn’t intimidate me.” Ryan offers a gentle smile to her. “We can go home right now if you want to though.”

She takes a moment, rolling her eyes at her own behavior, “No. He’s...” Charlotte pauses, “My parents are very welcoming and loving...because Mum remembers back to a time where...” She trails off a little, “and my Dad tried to use my Mum’s sexuality as a negative sort of...” Char shakes her head, “thing against her when it all came out.”

She’s never spoken much about her own family dynamic. He’s never felt a reason to ask her about it, but pays attention when she speaks. Ryan nods a little, “You can be angry at your father. I understand that. However, we’re only going for a late brunch. His focus, as is normal for grandparents, is going to be on Cole.” Ryan attempts to reiterate.

Charlotte’s face softens a little, “Probably.”

“Yeah.” Ryan lists her hand to his lips, softly kissing her knuckles, “and if you feel like you need to get out of there, we’ll go. I’m not tying you to anything.” He shrugs, “just stay with me or chase after
Cole. You’ll feel better that way.”

“You’re right.” She opens the palm of her hand when he brings it to his lips again, taking a moment to run her thumb along his cheek, just above the line of his beard. Char bites her lip a little, “I um...” Her eyes are glassy and a worrisome smirk is beginning to tug at the corner of her mouth, “I love you, Ry.”

A grin slowly grows on the man’s face, “I’ve been waiting to hear you say that since I first laid eyes on you.” Ryan says honestly, leaning over to give her a brief kiss before he turns his attention back to the car and the road ahead, “So...relax a bit, yeah? It’s just your Dad.”

“You’ll get to see my old room from when I was growing up.” Char tries to think of the positives as she folds her arms comfortably over her chest, “If Marcus hasn’t made it into something else.” She shrugs.

“I’ll ask again though, can you give me a summary of him so I’m not going in blind?”

“Marcus Dunn is a brilliant orthopedic surgeon. He currently serves as a Consultant of General Surgery over at Saint James Hospital. He used to do locum work for Holby, but when things happened with Mum it...didn’t seem like the best idea to return.” Charlotte shrugs a little, “He and Berenice Wolfe were married some twenty-five years and, in that time, he never understood the reason their marriage lasted so long was because of the Army. He only thought it was breaking them apart.” She continues her brief summary of her father’s accomplishments as Ryan continues along the way, finally pulling up in front of the man’s large detached home. Charlotte climbs out of the car, watching as Ryan obtains the sleeping Cole from his carseat, the boy relaxing comfortably in his arms.

“You’re rich.” Ryan playfully teases, tilting his head back to take the place in.

“My parents are...all three of them, I reckon.” She doesn’t make a comment about her own wealth, not seeing the need to. Charlotte notices the door of the house open, her father standing in the doorway.

“Last you came here, you were pregnant.” Marcus smirks, pushing the outer door open for their entry as he receives a playful look from his daughter. “I’m happy to see you home again. Welcome back, Char.”
“How could I ever forget?” Char cordially gives her father a kiss on his cheek as she passes him, “Dad, this is my boyfriend Ryan. Ryan, this is my father, Marcus Dunn.”

“Pleasure to finally put a face to the stories, Mr. Dunn.” Ryan offers his free hand to the man, shaking it once Marcus accepts the handshake. “Lovely home.”

Marcus watches his daughter’s boyfriend closely, “Thank you. Charlotte hasn’t spoken much about you. I apologize.” He closes the door behind all of them, “I do hope the two of you enjoy spinach frittata...also sausage. I bought some sausage.”

“You made a spinach frittata?” Char raises an eyebrow, helping Ryan remove his denim jacket, knowing the house would be warm. It always was. “On your own?”

“I used the internet and found a recipe...and a video. I watched instructions.” Marcus nods, his eyes shifting to his grandson in this virtually unknown man’s arms. He doesn’t like this. The closeness between this young man and his daughter forces him to question the young man’s intentions. “Something to drink?” He pauses, looking to his daughter again as she takes a seat on a sofa, “I picked up that white cranberry and peach mixture that you used to enjoy.”

“It was always the best juice.” Charlotte raises an eyebrow, “I’ll take that. Ry, coffee?” When he looks like he’s about to tell her how he likes it, “Two sugars and a touch of milk.” Her tone sounds slightly teasing as he flashes her a smile. “I’ll get it.” She moves away from her boyfriend toward her father’s kitchen.

Marcus offers her a warm expression, following behind her, “You seem to be doing better than you were.”

Char nods a little, “I...if you wouldn’t mind, I really wish not to speak of it. Any of it.” She pauses in her making of Ryan’s coffee to glance over toward her father. “I’m with Ryan now. I want you to get to know him.”

“You’ve already made up your mind about him.” He shrugs, moving away from her to place the frittata in the oven. It shouldn’t take long to cook. Twenty minutes at most. “What I say doesn’t matter.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”
You fancy him...immensely.” Marcus nods, backing away from the oven after a moment. He senses his daughter’s irritated gaze before he continues, “I don’t mean anything negative by it. Just...look at him with Cole.” He keeps his voice quiet, glancing over to the young man on the sofa, gently attempting to rouse the babe from his slumber. “You’ve let that happen.”

Charlotte had a feeling this brunch wouldn’t be without incident. “And?”

He slowly exhales, “I didn’t invite you here looking for a fight.” Marcus shakes his head slowly, “I’m just stating facts. If I didn’t like him, you wouldn’t care. It’s just like last time.” He stands a bit straighter when he feels her hand slap across his face.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” Char whispers menacingly, not believing what she had just done. Her hand now throbbing and reddened, but she ignores it. “Ryan Anand is an amazing man who has gone all in on my entire package deal...a deal that includes not only my son and myself, but also my own trauma and mental illness. If you think, for even a millisecond, that he has the ability to be anything like my ex...you will, literally, never hear from me again.”

“I was at fault then and I don’t-”

“I want to forgive you, but you won’t let me, Marcus.” Char licks her lips to rid them of their dryness, “you don’t respect me. Not really. I know how fathers are supposed to act toward their daughters’ boyfriends, but that is something you screwed up last time. Not something you get a redo on.”

Marcus nods slowly. She was right. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Pretend to be a decent human being.” Charlotte lifts her hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, “Bloody hell. I haven’t even been here twenty minutes and you’re coming at me with this...when I very clearly asked you not to.”

“Because if it seems too good to be true, it usually is, Char.”

“I know, you just want more cuddles, don’t ya?” Ryan rubs Cole’s back as he continues to keep his eyes closed, mostly playing with the man. Ryan lifts his head, calling toward the kitchen and almost certain he can feel someone watching them, the swinging door to the kitchen moved slightly when he glanced in that direction. He stands, keeping Cole close. Something isn’t right, he senses. Gently pushing the door open, he looks to the father and daughter, “Everything okay?”
Turning quickly to face him, Char flashes a smile. “Golden.” She nods, “I uh...was just about to make a new pot of coffee. That one is from early this morning and...though it smells incredibly strong, it isn’t terribly fresh.”

Ryan nods a little, able to see the uneasiness. *She’s lying.* “Someone has reserved himself to sleeping all the day long instead of playing.” He turns to the side for them to see the babe’s smirking face as it lies near Ryan’s shoulder. “I know he calls the Major and the Director his Gran and Nan, but what does he call you?” He meets Marcus’ eyes, able to see the distrust in them. This man doesn’t like him. That’s very clear, but he’s ready to give it back as much as he gets.

“Grandad.” Marcus answers quickly.

“Really? Sounds a lot like his name for the Major, aren’t you worried he’ll get it confused?” Ryan edges the other man on a bit.

“He’s a smart lad who can tell the difference between his grandmother and grandfather.” Marcus continues to watch the young man, “What does he refer to you as? I mean, you aren’t his father, are you...aren’t an uncle, or anything really.”

“He doesn’t need to call me anything, I’m always right by his side.”

Charlotte smirks a little, amused and touched by Ryan’s response, “Okay, that’s enough.” She puts her hands out, starting to laugh a little to herself. “Can we please give it a rest?” She glances between the men, before looking her father in the eyes. “You’re already walking a very fine line. I want to include you in my life, in Cole’s life, but you’re doing everything in your power to ensure I change my mind.”

Marcus inhales and exhales slowly, “I love you both-”

“Then shut up.” She notices her son’s hand gently stroking Ryan’s beard absently from the corner of her eye, something he does often when in the man’s arms. “Genetics mean nothing. If a person acts like a parent to a child or even to an adult, then they are that individual’s parent.” Char sighs, finishing Ryan’s coffee before handing it to him.

“Mr. Dunn, I don’t take care of Cole to get in Char’s good graces. I take care of him because I care for them both. I love them both dearly.” Ryan answers quietly, honestly. “Also, she knows exactly
how I like my coffee, so I kind of want to keep her around for as long as I possibly can.” He takes a sip from the mug in his free hand, receiving a playful scowl from the woman, “and I’m incredibly thankful.”

Charlotte glances back to her father when she notices his uncertain expression, “Not to mention, you’re not exactly known to be the best judge of character, Dad.”

Marcus nods a little, he deserves that and she isn’t incorrect. “Brunch is nearly ready if you both want to take to the dining room. I pulled down the old wooden high chair from the attic...if that makes things easier for you with Cole.”

“My old high chair?” Char’s face softens a little, “you still have it?”

“Of course I do. You and Cameron both used it. Your mother and I bought it together when he started eating solids.” Marcus casually folds his arms. “All of your baby things are up there. I thought either you or Cameron would use them if the day ever came, but...” Marcus shrugs, “you had everything taken care of.” He lifts a hand up when she seems like she may be about to object, “I don’t mean that with a negative connotation. I’m incredibly thankful to Serena for tending to you when I could not.”

“Me too.” Charlotte nods a little, leading the way from the room before she gets too emotional in front of her father. She pulls Ryan behind her with a tug of his polo shirt.

Marcus stands alone in the kitchen. Trying his best, he wanted to impress her with this frittata he taught himself how to make. Usually he only ate vegetarian takeaway or prepackaged salads. He doubts he’ll ever be in her good graces again, regardless of how many frittatas he makes on his own. He deserves all of her ire, but he’s just happy she agreed to come here today, agreed to speak to him again. He’ll give her new beau a chance, but only because she’s asked him to and he owes her that much.
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

Bernie learns her ex-husband is causing her daughter to doubt her only stable relationship.

Bernie wonders if there's any clout to Marcus's worry.

Chapter Notes

Double chapter!

They happen in the same day, nearly one after another with only a few hours in between, and I didn't want to get it confusing.

“How did it go?” Bernie sips from a mug of tea as she lounges comfortably on the sofa, watching her daughter cautiously. “Did Marcus put on the charm?”

Charlotte begins to almost bitterly chuckle to herself, lounging back on the sofa, glad to take her shoes off. “He taught himself how to make a frittata. It actually wasn’t all that bad for a first go. Needed a bit more seasoning, but he otherwise did fine with it.” She tucks a stray portion of hair behind her ear, “It was the most uncomfortable meal I’ve ever eaten in my entire life.”

Bernie furrows her brow, an amused smirk on her face, “More uncomfortable than when I came home from hospital a few years back?” The table was so quiet, one could hear a pin drop.

“Cam kept cracking jokes...that were only landing with you, dad was...thrilled, and...I remained silent because earlier in the day, you questioned a bruise on my cheek that I was hiding with makeup.” Char exhales slowly, waving her hand to dismiss her mother’s impending apology, something she’s can tell is coming just by the look on her mother’s face. ”Doesn’t matter really.”

“Not that I need an excuse, but I was also quite...intoxicated with various pain medications at the time.” She curls her lip, not wanting them in the first place, “came to find out, your father was slipping them in my drinks because I told him that I didn’t want to take them and he knew I needed them. He probably did the right thing on that one though.”
The young woman nods a little, “Ryan and I weren’t even through the entry door and Dad was insulting him.” She folds her arms, “like...insinuating that he was taking advantage of me, for the entire duration of us sitting there.” Char licks her lips, gears obviously going in the back of her head, “Problem is, he knows he can get to me. I just don’t understand why he would want to.”

“Because he likes to feel in charge.” Bernie nods slowly, “he likes to feel like he’s doing the right thing, and that he knows better than you.” She takes another sip from her mug, “you know your father.”

“I don’t feel like I do, though. Not anymore, not really” Charlotte sits up, placing her feet on the floor and beginning to bounce her leg on the toes of her left foot, an exit point for her anxiety. “I don’t recognize him. He, literally, looked at this man who my son thinks the world of, and proceed to imply that he wasn’t anything to him because he wasn’t of relation.”

“How did Ryan take it?”

“Better than I thought he would, honestly. It was me, I um...I slapped him.”

Bernie straightens up a little, “You slapped him.” She repeats, unsure she even heard the young woman correctly. It must have been bad for her daughter to result to a physical reaction. “That isn’t like you.”

“No, it isn’t.” Char responds quietly, shaking her head a little. “I hate that I did it...regardless of how infuriating he was being.” She folds her arms across her midsection, staring off toward the end of the sofa, at nothing in particular. “What if he’s right though? What if...I’ve let my guard down too quickly and Ryan is just-”

Keeping her face as neutral as she possibly can, Bernie knows her daughter needs to work through her thoughts on her own. “What would Ryan serve to gain by dating you or taking advantage of you over anyone else? What could he possibly be using you for that he doesn’t already have?” She notices the gears turning behind her daughter’s eyes, “Money? He has that, he’s a Peds Consultant. Place to stay? He has his own flat. I assume it’s well furnished?”

Charlotte nods, “Quite nicely.”

“He doesn’t gain any clout by dating the Medical Director’s daughter, quite the opposite, actually.” Bernie tilts her head from side to side, “So, what is there left?”
She swallows, finally glancing over toward her mother again, “My son.” Her leg continues to bounce, “Cole absolutely loves him and-”

“That’s it?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, “That’s your only strike against him?”

“Quite honestly, I’m better off being alone.” Charlotte swallows, “I’m so...terrified about being wrong again. About letting myself care about a man who...just finds pleasure in my pain. I should just cut my losses now and-”

"I think you and Mr. Anand need to have a chat.” Bernie thinks back to the night she asked her wife to run away for them to marry and she was lost in her own thoughts. Talking usually makes things better. “Also, possibly, I should speak with Marcus. I’d like to hear his reasons for trying to persuade you. Would that help?”

“Do what you want. I...need to apologize for my outburst.” Char stands, sliding her hands in her pockets as she mumbles to herself, “Makes me no better than-” She cuts herself off, clearing her throat. “I um...Cole is down for his nap, as is Ryan-” She smirks ever so slightly to herself. “And I’m...confused as to what I should feel.”

“It isn’t about what you should feel, it’s about what you do feel.” Even in their mending of their relationship, Charlotte usually doesn’t open up to her like this

“And I’ve been...taking my medication regularly and attempting to stay away from stress and...” Char lifts her hand, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, “and I didn’t want to go in the first place, but Ryan insisted. Said we could leave if I wanted to leave, but to just give it a go.”

“I’m sorry, darling.” Bernie watches her daughter, “I’m sorry that your father forgets how to be a decent human being at times.” She sighs softly, “He’s only ever wanted the best for you and Cameron, sometimes I believe he loses sight of what that might be. I’m sorry you’re experiencing that.”

The young woman shakes her head a little, rubbing a hand over her face, “I should have expected it, honestly.” She leaves the lounge area after standing there in silence for a moment longer.

Bernie reaches for her mobile on the coffee table, setting the empty mug of tea onto it in return. She touches her partner’s face for her contact information, choosing to send a text message instead of
phoning, 'Do me a favor? Assess patient comments in Ryan’s file. Love You. Xx’. At that moment, she’s never wanted Marcus to be more wrong about anything in her whole life.
Chapter 109

Chapter Summary

Serena breaks protocol to help her wife.

Bernie learns old habits die hard for her daughter.

Cole gets his way.

“I don’t understand what brought this all on.” Serena shakes her head, “You were his champion from the start. Even before they were together, you fancied him as a suitor for her.” She carefully removes her earrings, watching her partner at the same time, “Do you have any idea the trouble I could get in-”

“Marcus believes things are going too fast. I’m...inclined to agree with him.” Bernie shakes her head a little, reading through the thin file. “This...” She exhales slowly, relieved as she closes the folder, “This has nothing out of the ordinary. Not nearly as thick as my file, that’s for sure.”

“The only comments I saw that could be...troubling were about his tough love approach to care. He tends to the children, not the parents. His tongue gets him in trouble, but otherwise...he’s fine. More than fine. Specialist in pediatric internal medicine. He’s a scientist, having released multiple studies on the treatment of infectious diseases in children.” She explains to her wife, removing her blouse to pull on a nightgown. “They’re available online if you wish to have a look. He wrote one just before Cole was in hospital. That situation was his bread and butter.”

Bernie nods a little to herself, “Why is Marcus doing this, then?” It’s more of a question to herself, “He gains nothing and Char isn’t going to rush back to Daddy’s house anytime soon. Even if he did have a foot to stand on in regards to his insinuations.”

“Why are you both so worried about anything Marcus Dunn says?” Serena begins to collect the files up from their spread across the bed.

“I haven’t the slightest.” Bernie mumbles, offering the file in her hands back to her partner, “I reckon Ryan Anand would protect Charlotte and Cole with his life if it came down to it.”

“So just take him for face value until he’s ready to tell us more about himself. On paper, he’s tickety boom...which means absolutely nothing, as frustrating as that is.” Serena sighs softly, “I don’t get the
“You’re right.” Bernie nods slowly, taking hold of Serena’s hand when the woman finally gets in bed. “I guess I feel a bit of guilt about things. Marcus wouldn’t be the way he is now if it weren’t for my actions in the past.”

“There needs to come a time when you stop blaming yourself and allow him to be responsible for his own behavior.” Serena continues to hold her partner’s hand, gently rubbing her thumb over the other woman’s knuckles. “Yes, he loved you. Yes, you hurt him at the time. However, you hardly saw one another in the twenty-five years you were married. You had your own lives. Him carrying on the way he has is just...” She shakes her head a little, “He put his own daughter in harm’s way because of his own pride. To blame yourself for that is...simply absurd.”

She nods still, knowing her partner is correct in all of what she’s saying. Bernie ear perks up, “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Bernie rises off the bed, opening the door leading to the hallway. “Aside from the very masculine snoring coming from Char’s room that I haven’t heard in...years-”

“Yes, Ryan came to me after supper, I mean to tell you. He informed me that Charlotte told him to just stay over since it was getting so late, but he didn’t feel comfortable doing that without my permission since it was my home.” Serena raises an eyebrow, “I was quite impressed.”

As is Bernie, but she doesn’t say so. Making her way to Cole’s room, she carefully opens the door. The boy being quite loud in talking to himself. It causes a grin to grow across her face slowly. “Hey.” She nears the cot, watching as he excitedly stands, fully awake. “What are you up to, little one?” When the boy babbles toward her, as if he’s giving an explanation, she nods, “Simply couldn’t sleep, eh? Well, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Having followed her wife, Serena rolls her eyes, amused by the display. “Just after one. How about a bottle to get him back down?”

Bernie lifts her grandson from his cot, kissing his temple when he comfortably holds onto her. “Mind making that bottle?” When she sees Serena leave the room, Bernie returns to the hall where she spots a bleary eyed Ryan, “Hello.” She can’t think of anything else to say in that moment, having heard
the masculine snoring stop when she started speaking with Cole.

“Thought I heard someone out here.” Ryan rubs a hand over his face, “if you’re good with him, I’ll go back to sleep though. I didn’t want him waking you, but...seems I was too late.”

“I wasn’t asleep.” She notices the dampened spots on his cotton t-shirt near his chest, exactly where Charlotte would lay her head. Bernie watches him, “she’s still crying in her sleep?”

He couldn’t possibly lie about that, not that he wanted to either, maybe just as a way of protecting his girlfriend. “It isn’t as bad when she’s in her own bed.” Ryan lifts his head to meet the older woman’s eyes. “I just want her to feel okay. Know what I mean?”

“It may have taken some months, but I’ve gotten out of the habit of checking in on her multiple times at night. I highly doubt she knows any of that though.” Bernie flashes a smirk toward him. “If it becomes too much, you can use Jason’s room. Not as if he uses it anymore, but it’s important that you get some sleep.”

Ryan nods a little, his eyes still a bit squinty from the room light, “Night, Ms. Wolfe.”

Bernie smirks a bit more as he retreats back to the bedroom, amused when her partner appears a few moments later. “Did you pump the milk yourself?” She teases a bit, earning a quick chortle from her partner as she’s handed the bottle that Serena had taken the time to heat.

“Yes, because that’s something I’ve been able to do in the last twenty-some odd years. I’ve told Charlotte to cease purchasing it from the shops and I’ll just provide all the milk we ever need for this house on my own.” Serena amuses, reaching her hand over to run through Cole’s medium brunette hair.

Watching as the boy holds his bottle to his own mouth, only to chew on the nipple. “Ah, so this is a teething thing.” Bernie raises an eyebrow, still holding the boy as he dramatically leans back with his bottle, as he usually does. She hums a bit, placing him back into his cot. “I think there’s a bottle of numbing somewhere-” She starts glancing about the shelves of his changing table, obtaining the glass bottle finally. “Ah ha.”

“You didn’t think to check that first?” Serena tilts her head to the side, arms slowly folding across her middle.
“He didn’t seem upset, so no.” Bernie carefully applies the medicine to the babe’s gums, hearing him comfortably humming. “Better?”

“You know, if...when they decide to be a family and want a place of their own...this...” Serena swallows, “I’m really going to miss this. Tending to him...I’m going to miss it so very much.” She leans her head into the crook of her wife’s neck.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about for a while yet.” Bernie wraps an arm around her wife more, pressing a kiss against her temple. They turn away from the boy in the cot, only to be stopped by his yell, causing them to turn toward him once more. Cole standing again, reaching a hand toward them with a grabby motion. His bottle going ignored since it was only their attention he really wanted.

Serena moves away from her wife, obtaining the boy from his cot and holding him closely. “He can sleep with us tonight.” He places his head against the woman’s shoulder, offering a sly smirk toward his Gran as his Nan moves to the doorway.

“I knew that was coming. You spoil him, Campbell.” Bernie shakes her head slowly, amused by her wife and grandson both. Cole had been getting so used to co-sleeping with them, Bernie’s almost certain he just thinks of it as his own bed at this point. Bernie knows one of her wife’s biggest fear is losing this familial closeness after rarely feeling it before. Honestly, it’s one of Bernie’s biggest fears now too.
Chapter 110

Chapter Summary

In a session with Annette, Serena admits her reservations about her step-daughter's independence.

Annette questions if Serena wishes she and Bernie could just raise Cole alone.

Chapter Notes

Takes place a couple days after the previous chapter.

I've missed Serena talking through things and I'd also like to point out that I cast Mary McDonnell as a psychologist long before news about Veronica Mars came out. LOL.

Don't forget this weekend is the start of a major event. I'm sorry in advance.

“She’s...spending more and more time with the boyfriend.” Serena leans back against the sofa within the confines of her therapist’s office. “Something tells me she’s going to want to move out very soon. They’re moving quite fast...and that worries me.”

“Why does it worry you?” Annette Vickers takes a sip from the mug of tea between her hands.

“Because she’s only, in a bit over a month or so, seems to be holding it together.” Serena shrugs a little. “I’m not ready for her to leave. I’m not ready for her to take Cole...even if that’s his mother.” Seeing Annette’s slightly confused expression, she continues, “Charlotte...before Ryan became a thing, wasn’t constant in Cole’s life. Yes, we all live together and she was present around him, but it was mostly Bernie and I tending to him. It’s why he favors us so much, I reckon.”

“So, it’s more about Cole than it is about Charlotte.”

Serena begins shaking her head negatively, “it’s both of them. I worry that...Charlotte’s current mental stability will quickly change or deteriorate, as it has in the past. I worry that...Ryan, the boyfriend, won’t know how to react to it.”

Annette tilts her head to the side, leaning forward to place her mug on the table before adjusting her
posture in the high backed chair. “Wouldn’t he just learn like you did?”

“Honestly, I don’t want to put that burden on him.” Serena folds her hands in her lap, “He’s been...incredibly kind and caring toward both her and Cole. She deserves all of it, don’t misunderstand me.” She pauses, “I’d even go as far as to say he probably loves her.” She lifts a hand stroking her hair at her temple with her nails.

“You seem uneasy about that.”

“Oh, no..No, I’m-”

Annette raises her brow, “You are...just a bit.”

“It’s so fast.” Serena shakes her head a little, “her father had...insinuated the same to her during a brunch they had recently and she was absolutely furious. Understandably so, her history with him is strained, but I think he’s trying to make an effort to get in her good graces...just not in the right way.”

“It happens with some people, Serena. Some just...know and understand what their heart wants.” She nods a little, motioning to her patient, “look at you and Bernie. Something just...clicked between the two of you and you knew nothing was going to keep you apart.”

“We were friends for...quite a while though before...romance began.”

“And you don’t think the process can be different for other people?” Annette crosses one leg over the other, “do you believe there’s some clout to her father’s insinuations?”

“No, I don’t believe there is.” Serena sighs a little, “It isn’t about the...experience, or lack thereof, within their relationship. It’s about Charlotte and her...extremes.” She begins to speak with her hands a little, “I’ve seen her at her best and I’ve seen her at her worst.” She pauses, inhaling slowly, “Ryan hasn’t. He doesn’t know what...what she does and I’m afraid what his reaction could possibly be when she does display that aspect of herself. Will he know how to calm her down? Will he accidentally...leave Cole with her during those times?”

“What if she doesn’t have them with him?” Annette offers, “or would you rather she be dependent on you?”
Serena never thought of that, not really. “I worry she may revert back to her old habits. I worry she’ll want to be this...housewife figure again instead of going back to school and bettering herself.”

“It’s her choice.”

“She’s absolutely brilliant...” Serena leans forward a bit, resting her elbows on her knees, “whether it be about cooking or her medical knowledge that she doesn’t give herself enough credit for. To waste all of that would just be...criminal.” She licks her lips, “she can do absolutely anything. Doesn’t need to be either of the two things I mentioned, but I need her to...want to explore that.”

Annette nods slowly, “Understandable, but it’s still her choice.” The consultant repeats, “If she wants to stay at home with her son, then that’s what she’ll do. If she wants to go to school or seek employment somewhere, that’s what she’ll do.” She offers a gentle smile, “All of it, what to do with her life, is her decision...and her decision alone, Serena.”

“I understand.” Serena swallows, “I just don’t know if I can accept that if the path she chooses is to do nothing.”

“There you go.” Annette says quietly. “That’s the answer I was looking for.”

“I worry that...Cole won’t be properly tended to if staying home is her decision. I don’t doubt her love for her son, but...I do worry he’ll be neglected at times.”

“And that doesn’t happen when you and Bernie are tending to him.” Seeing her patient’s negative head shake, Annette licks her lips slowly. “Would you prefer it if Charlotte wasn’t in the picture at all and left you and Bernie to tend to Cole by your lonesome?”

Serena leans back on the sofa, “I love Charlotte. I love her very much.” She’s never actually said those words outright to her stepdaughter, at least not that she remembers, giving herself pause, “I want the best for her. I also want the best for Cole. I think...at times, yes, Cole would be better off with just Bernie and myself tending to him, but I also wouldn’t want Charlotte to bugger off either. I’d prefer that they both stay close...in our house. I want to...I want to take care of the both of them. It isn’t one over the other...not really.”

“Why do you believe you feel that way?”
“I...I know I miss taking care of Elinor.” She slowly folds her arms across her chest, “and I really didn’t get much of a chance to help Jason. It was beyond my depth for the most part. Luckily, he has Greta now...who is perfect for him in nearly every way. Understands him far better than I ever could.” Serena pauses, taking a moment before continuing, “but Cole...is young. He doesn’t care about the past or...had any issues with either Bernie or myself like our children have. Seeing Cole’s face light up when he sees Bernie or myself come home from work, or the way he carries around one of my shirts to sleep at night and changes them out when they cease smelling like my perfume, or the way he cuddles up to Bernie when he’s tired...and only Bernie.” She quickly huffs a sound of amusement.

“Seems he loves the both of you very much.” Annette offers a gentle smile toward her patient. “Do you think, maybe, he’s grown to depend on you too much?”

Serena shakes her head negatively, “He’s fine.” She answers quietly, “I don’t wish to change a single thing about that.”

Annette holds a finger up at nearly the exact moment the chime goes off, signifying the end of their session. “You mentioned shopping with Charlotte and Cole for their weekend getaway?”

“Yes” Serena clears her throat, offering a quick smile, “with the boyfriend. Just a...small jaunt.” She shakes her head a little, “I’m slightly worried, but...I know I shouldn’t be. They’ll be fine.”

“Very good. Have fun, Serena.” Annette smiles a bit, watching as her patient leaves. Serena Wolfe has come a long way in their sessions together, but her development in opening up to those around her has only created a whole new host of issues. These issues, however, should be a bit easier to deal with.
Chapter 111

Chapter Summary

A simple shopping trip turns bloody for Charlotte, Serena, and Cole.

Chapter Notes

Later the same day as the last chapter.

This all starts off a new section with drama and tragedy. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Charlotte looks at herself in the mirror of the public toilet after washing her hands, “Should start carrying a bloody toothbrush.” She mumbles to herself, having just spent the past few moments retching in the stall. “Chin up, Wolfe.” Taking a deep breath, she finally steps away, heading to the other room where Cole is walking around the lounge area just outside the toilets. “Once you take him out of his stroller, there’s no getting him back in, you know.”

“I’m aware. He was getting antsy.” Serena tilts her head to the side, quickly giving the young woman a glance once the boy staggers over to take hold of her knee. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Everything’s fine.” Her tone sounds like she just wants the other woman to change the subject and she does. For the love of god, she does. Charlotte holds her hand out, her son taking hold of it after a moment. She walks along. “So...swim costumes.”

Serena follows behind, pushing the now empty stroller. Something is off about the entire situation. “Two plasters and dental floss, or were you going for something more substantial?”

Charlotte snorts her amusement, “A bit more than that, yes, thank you. Cole did quite a number.”

“Your waist is the size of my thigh, so let’s not-” Serena pauses, furrowing her brow when the lights flicker above. “Odd.”

“Happens. Rolling blackouts, maybe? It’s hot.” Char shrugs, going back to what she was doing.
before, “He has his Puffs in the bag.” She places the boy in the chair after a moment, not strapping him in, “Cole, Puffs?” After being handed the canister from her stepmother, she pours them onto the tray in front of the boy, knowing it would keep him occupied as she looks through clothing racks.

“What about this one?” Serena motions to a two piece, vintage appearing costume. High waist bottoms with a halter top, light cerulean colored.

Standing carefully to see what the woman had in her hand, “I actually really like that.” Char smirks, “Hold onto that one, what about this?” Olive colored, crocheted, opened back one piece. It goes high on the chest, but there’s something about it that Char likes.

“Well, you haven’t a single one currently. So, I’d say let’s grab quite a few, wouldn’t you agree?”

Charlotte nods a little, “Bit of a treat to myself.” She furrows her brow, “Do you smell that?”

“No, no I don’t.” A smirk starts to form at the corner of her mouth, having suspected something based on the young woman’s actions over the past week or so, “Charlotte.” When she garner’s her eye, she continues, “Are you pregnant?”

Glancing away, Char answers quickly, “Today is about shopping for this holiday, please.”

“Does Ryan know?” The area is crowded, there’s a sale. However, people aren’t shopping for swim costumes here. Not at these prices. Serena is just happy that Charlotte asked her along, honestly.

“I smell smoke. That’s the smell I was referring to. Smoke. We should probably-”

The area becomes active in screams. What was previously a relatively quiet area, now has angry shouts of the term “Capitalist Dogs” . Suddenly, an explosion by the escalator, their main way to the lower floor. Then another, and another. Char removes her son from his stroller, holding him to her chest until quickly noticing a blinking red light atop a purchase counter not too far from them. “Get back.” She calls to Serena, but it’s too late.

The space erupts in flames. People crying, people confused. Charlotte can feel herself having a hard time coming to. She doesn’t know how long she’s been unconscious. “Cole?” She glances around, seeing her son plopping onto the floor to lie down against her stepmother. A slight smirk on her face. Relief. He’s safe. However, Serena doesn’t move. Not even to pull him close as she usually does.
“Mum.” She tries, crawling closer. Char realizes that it is quite painful to move, sore for her to even breathe, but adrenaline kicks in.

Her fingers go to the side of Serena’s neck, feeling for a pulse. Nothing. She begins compressions. They aren’t on the ground floor, or even the first. They aren’t going to be helped anytime soon. “Please, Serena.” Something starts in her own head, like some sort of autopilot. Ten minutes past, possibly more. Char doesn’t know how long she’s been doing this and, really, it doesn’t matter. Her eyes refuse to fill with tears, she’s focused and determined.

Serena begins to cough, taking a moment before groggily opening her eyes. Taking the sight of her relieved stepdaughter above her. Serena just washes her. “You’re...you’re bleeding.” She croaks, not really remembering or understanding what’s happening. It’s so hot.

“It’s okay.” Char leans down, placing a gentle kiss at the woman’s hairline, accidentally smudging a bit of the blood dripping from her mouth onto the woman’s brow. “I’m going to see who else needs help. I’ll be back in a moment.” She glances around, finding a cotton beach cover shirt on one of the clothing carousels. Reaching for it, she begins to rip it apart as best she can. Carefully, and quite painfully, standing, Charlotte notices the insufficient sprinkler system just dripping water. She holds sections of the shirt up, causing them to wet before kneeling again. She places one of the sections of the cloth onto her stepmother’s nose and mouth, then one onto her son’s.

“You’re bleeding, Charlotte.” Serena tries again, too tired to move the beach coverup from her face, but it’s useless. The young woman is already moving away from her. She feels a light weight on her side, running a lazy hand over the spot to realize it’s her grandson. How can he sleep at a time like this? She asks herself. “Your Gran is not going to be happy.” Slowly, she fades into unconsciousness once more.

Chapter End Notes

I've said it in previous chapters, and I'll say it with this one, what happens on the show will not effect what happens in this story.

I've left the show far behind me and I hope I continue to stay true to the characters that I've fallen in love with even though I no longer watch. Characters that were vastly underused and even mistreated on the show itself.

That being said, again, you have absolutely nothing to worry about with this story.
Chapter 112

Chapter Summary

When Holby City AAU is designated Trauma center for the attack, Bernie takes over, doing what she does best.

Cameron promises to protect his stepmother.

Bernie realizes she's closer to this than she thought.

Chapter Notes

I keep worrying that character placement is hard to envision with this. I hope it reads well. <3

Since Holby City Hospital was the closest to the site of what news outlets are referring to as a terrorist attack, they are currently getting the onslaught of new patients. Some with simple smoke inhalation and shock, others with much more serious injuries. At Henrik Hansen’s request, Bernie has set up AAU like a field hospital. Something she’s done in the past that works for this type of situation. ED had their hands full, but there was no better person in charge for this type of ordeal than Berenice Wolfe. AAU getting the more serious patients.

Ric removes his surgeon’s cap, holding it under his arm as he moves to the nurses’ station desk to quickly update a patient file. He’s tired, exhausted even. He had turned around in the car park when he heard the sirens, knowing by the sheer amount of them, that he would still be needed by his department. Lifting his head, he sees his friend in front of him. “You’re in your element, Ms. Wolfe.”

“You can take the girl out of the Army, but you can’t take the Army out of the girl.” Bernie shakes her head, picking up another file. She turns to point out the space, “That section is nearly finished breathing treatments and ready to be discharged. I’ve had Harry is on simple sutures over there, Jo sticking with her to assist. Worst ones first, per the usual. They have a system going. Xav is on fractures and dislocations.”

“I think a few of the internal injuries can head to Keller. Help us out a bit. Third level is the last floor of the shop. They’re starting to head in now from what I understand.”

Bernie nods a little, “Good.” She exhales slowly, “I forgot the rush to all of this.” A subtle smile begins to grow on her face.
“Mum.” Cameron calls, pushing a stretcher through the double doors to the AAU.

“Dr. Dunn-” Bernie playfully scowls toward her son after turning to face him, “I’ve told you how many times-”

“Mum, it’s Serena.” Cameron stays at the head of the stretcher as they rush it through, “Foreign body in upper left torso. Appears to be metallic in nature. Medics said she shows signs of resuscitation, few cracked ribs and sternum, but it’s unknown who supplied it. We should send her straight up to-”

Serena hears her partner’s voice through it all, glad when she sees her rush over, “Hey.”

“I didn’t think you’d be in the thick of this too.” Bernie shakes her head, taking her wife’s hand and gripping it. “I tried phoning earlier, now I know why you didn’t answer.” She leans down, kissing the corner of her mouth. “Cam is going to take you to theater.” She looks so pale, Bernie thinks. “Were you round the shops alone?”

“No,” She focuses on her wife’s eyes, “No X-Rays for Charlotte.” Serena is in a great deal of pain, but wouldn’t dare show it. Her eyelids are heavy, Serena can feel she’s about to lose consciousness yet again.

Bernie nods absently, “I love you, Serena.” Make sure she hears you.

“Stats are dropping. Get Mr. Hansen...possibly Ms. Naylor. Mum stay here, I’ve got this.” Cam interjects, watching his parents for a moment. He motions for the other nurses around him to continue to push Serena Wolfe toward the double doors leading to the theater spaces, following closely behind as to not dare to leave her side anytime soon.

Bernie watches the group as she’s separated from them, glad Ric is already making the necessary calls next to her. She stands still, knowing her daughter wouldn’t be far behind. She clears her throat, running a hand through her fringe that has managed to escape her tied back hair. “I should be there.” Bernie doesn’t need to motion toward the theater rooms, but her friend understands what she’s referring to.

“Take a breather, Bernie.” Ric places the telephone receiver back on the base. “Everyone has their assignments and they’re all doing incredibly well. Drs. Copeland and Goddard are on their way down, as is Ms. Goddard. We have an ample amount of help and we’re going to start sending
patients to different specialty levels if they require treatment in these separate fields within the hour. Just do yourself a favor and grab a water or coffee while Serena’s in surgery.”

Bernie shakes her head, “I need to keep working.” Her tone quiet, lifting her head when the door opens again, Sasha holding her grandson, an ambulance blanket wrapped around the small boy. Before she even sees the babe’s face, she knows exactly who it is.

“I’ve notified Otter. He needs some oxygen, possibly an MRI. He’s having a hard time staying awake.” Sasha says calmly, wanting to keep the boy relaxed. “Bernie, stay with him. We have things handled here and he needs you most right now. Ric,” When the man looks over to him, “you should head home.”

Ric shakes his head a little, “I’ll take to the on-call room.” He looks to the blonde, licking his lips to rid them of their dryness, “He’s right though, Bernie. Charlotte, I assume, isn’t going to be in any sort of way to tend to him once she’s brought in. The last thing he needs is to be alone.”

“I can tend to Charlotte when she arrives.” Sasha carefully hands the boy to his grandmother, his face softening when Cole instinctively grips onto Bernie, “He’s just been through a traumatic event...and he wants no one else at this moment except you.”

“Serena said no x-rays for Charlotte.” Bernie absently strokes the boy’s hair, as she moves away from the nurses’ station. She doesn’t give much thought to her wife’s warning, but knows she should pass along the information. Hold it together, Wolfe. She tells herself, seeing one of the smaller oxygen canisters on a transport cart. They are often brought in for Mass Trauma Events, times such as this. She sets it up, connecting a sterile tube to one end, not willing to let the boy go. Bernie holds the other end of the tube in front of his mouth and nose, the masks on this floor too large for him. She’s in her own world, the chaos around them doesn’t matter. It’s a different time for her. “Can’t catch a break, can you?” It isn’t a question she expects him to answer, just happy when he offers her a tired smile, which he only really gives as a response to hearing her familiar voice.

Ric had been tying up a few loose ends before retreating to the on-call room. He moves closer to his friend, who had been swaying with the infant, gently touching her arm to garner her attention. “Otter has their own imaging area. They’re ready for you both.” With the blonde’s uncertain nod, he continues, “Serena will fight. Charlotte...well, you know how she is. She has you in her.” He offers a kind soft smile, “You take care of those you’re able to. Let us take care of the rest.”

He’s right, as Bernie knows. However, she still finds it hard to just walk away from the unit. Especially since this is exactly what she’s trained to do and has done for many, many years. Looking down to her grandson in her arms, she slowly steps away from the busy ward, touching the button on the elevator. Family first, she swallows.
Essie is surprised to see the consultant away from AAU during a time like this once the elevator opens, especially with a patient that literally any staffer could have brought up. “Is this the patient Sasha phoned about?” She had been cross training for other departments to be a floating nurse. It was far more relaxing that way. Otter, so far, seems to be a perfect fit for her.

“Yes, he’s responding positively to oxygen, but we didn’t have any masks to fit him on AAU.” Bernie answers confidently, “He needs to go straight to imaging.”

“As we’ve been previously informed, we have it prepared.” Essie holds her hands out to receive the boy, “I can take it from here, Ms. Wolfe. I’m certain your presence is nearly required on AAU during this mess.” When the woman doesn’t respond immediately, focusing intently on the babe in her arm, “Ms. Wolfe...”

“He’s my grandson. My wife and daughter were...in the attack. They’ve yet to find Charlotte and Serena’s in surgery. I’m...I’m not about to let him go.” Bernie’s eyes glisten with stored tears, a soft side that Essie wasn’t aware the woman even had. “So...onward, Nurse De Luca.”
Chapter 113

Chapter Summary

Patients begin to speak of a savior.

Ryan realizes not being married to Charlotte may work in his favor.

The last survivor is found, but will she actually pull through?

“There was a girl, young. Might have even been a teenager...I don’t know, I’m bad with ages. Could hardly breathe herself, but I’ll tell you what, she saved me wife’s life. Pulled her away from a roaring fire and even covered her mouth with a wet cloth, dunno why she did that one though. The sprinklers wasn’t working right, see.” The middle aged bald man explains to the young doctor treating him, “She had to be a doctor or something. She must be here.”

“I’m not sure, sir.” Xavier looks over the scans taken of the man’s leg via the tablet computer in his hands, making small talk for the moment, “Do you remember her name?” He swipes his finger over the screen.

“No...no, I just been calling her Angel.” He shakes his head, “She told me I had a compound fracture and used one of the dress shirts from the rack to tie round me leg. Surely she would have made it out.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Paulus, I wouldn’t know. Whoever she was, she was right about your leg though. Compound fracture. I’m afraid you’re going to need surgery.” Xav answers honestly, “We’ve removed the shirt and put a clamp in place, but whoever-it-was saved you from bleeding out. The bone caused a cut your femoral artery, the pressure from the tied shirt kept the artery closed for the most part, but it mostly remains intact. High risk of infection, so we’re going to put you on some strong antibiotics and attempt to fix the issue out here.”

Mr. Paulus seems amazed, “What about me wife? Why the cloth?”

“Oh...” He glances around, “Is she here?” When the patient points in a particular direction, he nods a little, “Smoke inhalation. The wet cloth would have lessened the effects. At least until your wife could be saved by paramedics.”

“See? That girl is my Angel.”
“Sorry, I was...I couldn’t help overhearing.” Harry Linstrom peeks around the curtain, “Xav, a moment.” When the man steps from the inside of the curtain to the side of it, but leaving it open, she continues, “Is your patient talking about some young superheroine? I mean...few of them over here are calling her a blonde Wonder Woman, which...why not just call her Captain Marvel, but who am I to judge.”

“Yeah.” Xav nods, “Only the ones on the third floor. Not all of them, but a few.”

“Reckon someone would have recognized her by now?”

“Depends if she has facial trauma.” He shrugs, motioning to his patient, “I need to do this before there’s even more chance of infection...though it’s...” Xav sighs, about to retreat to the nurses’ station to update his patient file, “Non-sterile environment and all that.”

“Just do what you need to do. Field hospital tactics, remember?” Harry shrugs, “All we can do, really.” She lifts her head when someone is pushed through the doors, it had calmed for the most part. Paramedics and the fire brigade having retrieved most of the victims.

Ange Goddard is pushed through the doors of the AAU, nearly straddling her patient as she performs compressions to the young woman’s chest. “Double pneumothorax with possible heart trauma, unstable, multiple broken ribs, one protruding. Possible facial fracture. I need an anesthesiologist ASAP. Get me a Plastic consult. All in one go.”

“Charlotte Wolfe.” Xav whispers to himself, standing from his seat behind the desk.

“My Angel!” Ron Paulus calls out as she passes, his voice filled with disappointment.

“Poor girl.” Dom pushes the stretcher along, having received it from the ambulance bay, “should we attempt a crash cart?” He glances up to the YAU consultant, “what do you want me to do?”

“Continue with compressions until we can open her up?” Ange carefully climbs down from the ambulance stretcher, allowing the nurses and other doctors transfer her patient to Holby’s own stretcher within the theater walls.
“Ms. Goddard, what is the meaning of this?” Henrik Hansen glances up, carefully edging the metal rod stuck in the side of his patient, only centimeters from injuring her heart more spectacularly. He understands, though, how the foreign object could have affected the muscle’s ability to beat properly, “The chances of cross contamination are-”

“We’ve haven’t any more room available and no time to spare. No reason we can’t share this space. They were in the same place and exposed to the same smoke and germs. You stay over there, I’ll stay over here.” Ange shakes her head, moving toward the sinks, calling out to the team with her, “Dom, I don’t care how you do it, but keep her heart beating.” She immediately starts the water, only having a bit of experience with a trauma-like setting and the necessity to stop the bleeding first.

Dom nods a little, “Mr. Hansen, it’s...” He swallows, “It’s Bernie Wolfe’s daughter.”

Henrik sighs a little, understanding instantly, but not willing to admit he agrees with the situation. “Keep them together.” He mumbles under his breath the nurse in front of him, “Suction.”

“My team, wash up, please.” Ange returns, motioning with her head for Dom to join everyone else once they receive some sort of sinus rhythm. “Dom, before you start your scrub, phone Bernie. Let her know Charlotte’s been found.” She hadn’t realized, until she heard her son’s words, that this was the young woman everyone was so worried about. She’s met Charlotte Wolfe on numerous occasions, but it just didn’t click while she was trying to keep her alive.

“Also Cameron Dunn, if possible.” Henrik calls out, hearing his fellow consultant. He had told the F2 to leave the room since he was family with Serena Wolfe now. Had it been a couple months ago, it would have been questioned, but technically allowed. Cameron Dunn was unhappy to say the very least.

“On it.” Dom nods, not liking the call he’s about to make. Reaching into his pocket, retrieving his mobile. He scrolls through his contacts, touching the picture next to the one with Bernie Wolfe’s name, it’s of the two of them in better times during one of their rooftop chats. He closes his eyes, dreading every second of this.

“Dr. Copeland, any word?” Bernie answers quickly, Cole sleeping against her as they sit next to his bed in the Otter ward’s main area.

“They found Charlotte. Ms. Goddard has her in theater now. Sharing a space with Mr. Hansen and Ms. Campbell.” He uses the woman’s former name, knowing his friend would understand. “We’re going to do our best, Bernie...for the both of them.”
“I have no doubt that you all will. I’m still on Otter with Cole, please...just keep me informed.” Her tone quiet as to not startle the concussed infant, something she knew to be true without needing to be told as such. She ends the call, closing her eyes. She feels the baby start to softly cry against her, “I know, my cub. I know it hurts. Concussions aren’t fun.” Usually, Bernie would just signal the nurses’ station with a wave since she knows how bothersome a call button can be, but with the curtains closed to keep the space around the boy as dim as possible, that was nearly impossible. She presses the button before gently bringing her free hand to rub her grandson’s back.

“I apologize, we’re doing a bit of changing of the guards—” A voice starts before pulling back the curtain. Ryan sees his girlfriend’s mother sitting there, “Ms. Wolfe...what happened?” He furrows his brow, not really understanding why the woman has a blanket covering the patient’s head.

Bernie closes her eyes, completely forgetting to inform Ryan of the ordeal, and Jason. Both of them are in the dark. Better she has more information in order to tell her nephew, however. He’d want to understand everything. “The...” She swallows, “They were in the attack, Ryan.” She’s doing her best to keep her voice steady, it’s proving to be quite a hard thing to do. “The shops on Juniper...the terrorist attack.”

Ryan lifts his head, feeling his throat go dry. “No.” He whispers allowed, “No, no, no. Are they okay?”

Slowly shaking her head negatively, “They’re both in surgery. Same operating theater.” Bernie pauses, “I saw Serena beforehand and...we spoke briefly, but Charlotte...Dom Copeland sounded nervous.” She explains, watching as the man carefully takes a seat on the edge of the hospital bed. He looks gutted, she thinks, “Char’s in good hands, Ryan. They both are.”

“And Cole?”

“Concussion and smoke inhalation, I’d bet. He’s in a bit of pain and I’m unable to order him anything.” Bernie notices the babe doesn’t get loud with his whimpers and, mostly a sad gentle hum. “Could you get him something?”

“But I’m his—” Ryan pauses, nothing. He’s nothing. He isn’t his father, or family at all really. Not yet anyway. He nods a little, “Yeah...yeah, I can do that for him.”

“If you can’t handle working today, knowing what you know now, no one would fault you, Ryan.” Bernie swallows, watching him. “Could I possibly see his scans? No one will tell me anything. I feel
“Of course.” Ryan answers quickly, finally standing and moving away from them. If he’s able to treat Cole because of a technicality, he will jump at the opportunity. At least he can do that. He tells the nurse what he wants for the patient as he obtains the tablet computer, returning to the bed. “Let me properly assess him?”

“Yeah.” Bernie allows the man to carefully remove the babe from her chest, which he doesn’t seem to happy about. She touches a few things on the tablet, finally taking a look at his scans. “Basilar skull fracture, just as I suspected.”

“The bruising.” Ryan nods, seeing it around Cole’s eyes and the backs of his ears. “How are the nerves?” He notices the blood dripping from the boy’s ear and clear fluid from his nose. “CSF leak as well. Hopefully, that should heal in about a week.”

“Nerves seem intact, but we would need to get him to walk. I know he can hear as he recognized my voice. I know he can see because the lighting is giving him a bit of a headache.”

“That leaves smell and speech.”

“Yeah.” Bernie nods, “Vocal cords work, you can hear the humming. Smell...we just won’t know yet.” She pauses, “I can try later on with one of Serena’s shirts. He likes the ones that smell like her.” A soft smirk plays at the corner of her mouth, “We thought he liked the silk texture when he started to take it from the clothing baskets. Char did a load of laundry, washing Serena’s leopard print silk shirt that he couldn’t bare to be parted with, having waited until he was asleep. Upon offering it back to him, he didn’t care for it in the slightest. That’s when we knew it was her smell.”

Ryan smiles a little at the story, “He has you both wrapped around his fingers.” He continues to do some general tests on the boy, including his vital signs.

“You as well.” Bernie shrugs, “If he wasn’t feeling so poorly, we both know how he would react to seeing you.”

She’s right, as Bernie Wolfe often was. “You’ll tell me if they phone you again, right? About the Director and Char?” Ryan asks cautiously, caring a great deal not only for Charlotte Wolfe, but for this family as a whole.
“When she’s out of theater, I’m certain she would want to see you.” Bernie nods reaches over to gently rub Cole’s tummy with her nails when he starts to cry a bit more. Amused by his use of the term the Director to describe Serena, knowing that’s probably how they refer to her when they’re alone. She sets the tablet computer at the foot of the bed, “Everything is perfectly fine, my cub.”

“We’ll go together.” Ryan carefully drapes the blanket over the boy’s eyes, noticing his crying lessening, glad when the nurse brings over the medication he had asked for, “Essie, Cole has a CSF leak. Get a monitor on him. I need to keep track of that heart rate. I also want a line with fluids. He’s had a previous instance of meningitis and this is kind of a serious thing if it doesn’t heal up quickly.”

“Of course.” Essie offers a sad smile to the trio in front of her, having heard stories from Ryan Anand and knowing just how much he cares for this little boy. “Is he hungry?”

“I reckon he should be. We’ve been up here for nearly two hours and I’m not entirely sure how long they were...they were trapped for.” Bernie nods, finding it hard to say the words even.

“Bottle or-”

Ryan answers absently, “The Puffs. Any flavor, he isn’t picky. Also, one of the packets of-”

“Apple sauce with the vegetable mixed in. Of course.” Essie smirks to herself, slowly moving away, “Coming up.”

“See? Fatherly behavior.” Bernie’s words garner an amused expression from the young man. Speaking of fathers, Marcus, she thinks to herself. She needs to notify Marcus of all this. Also find out if Cameron was allowed to remain in theater, which she doubts, or his current whereabouts. However, that can all wait a bit. This is what she needs to focus on now.
Chapter 114

Chapter Summary

Marcus puts their past behind him to offer support to his ex-wife.

Ange's attempts to save a life prove futile.

Chapter Notes

Couple hours after the least chapter.

I think we'll do double chapters for the rest of July.

“Everyone step back.” Ange calls out, defibrillation paddles in her hands as she slides them into her young patient’s chest, “Come on, Charlotte. Come on.” She’s in her own world at that moment, just her and this patient, the daughter of someone she’s grown to call a friend.

Henrik glances over, “That’s the fifth time-”

“She’s young, with an infant child. Not to mention the daughter of-”

“Yes, I’m aware. However, the injuries she sustained during her ordeal, as you’ve seen, were immense.” He carefully begins to suture his own patient. “Her suffering must not continue, Ms. Goddard, if her body is too far gone.” There’s a dark cloud that fills the room and it’s obvious that this carries a heavier clout than most other patients.

Ange nods slowly, “Just one more minute.” She whispers, carefully taking her deceased patient’s hand. Her own chin trembling with the thought of the words she’s going to need to tell her friend, not to mention Serena finding out that she made it when Charlotte did not. With teary eyes, she lifts her head toward the clock, “Call it.”

Dom begins to remove the flat paddles that were sticking from the young woman’s chest, willing himself not to cry.
“Eighteen forty-two.” Ange finally says, her voice hoarse with emotion. She slowly lets go of the young woman’s hand, but stops herself when she feels it twitch. “I’ll speak to the family about organ harvesting before-”

“Wait, wait a minute.” Dom calls to the consultant, staring at the space on the young patient’s chest containing her heart, as it suddenly begins to twitch. Reaching his gloved hand into the chest cavity, he carefully wraps it around the muscle, “We can finish, it’s just weak. She isn’t gone.” He swallows, “Cardiac massage. I’ve done this before. In fact, with Ms. Cam-” He tilts his head, correcting himself, “Mrs. Wolfe.”

“She goes by both usually.”

Dom turns his head, seeing Cameron Dunn standing in the viewing area, speaking to the room through the intercom. “You shouldn’t be here.” His tone honest, yet caring.

“I promised my mother I wasn’t going to leave them alone...and I don’t plan to go back on my word.” Cam shakes his head a little as he removes his hand from the intercom button, he folds them across his chest. Even Henrik Hansen wasn’t going to get anywhere arguing with him. He reaches into his pocket after a moment, removing his mobile when it begins to vibrate. “Dad...hello.”

“Cameron, your mother phoned. Any word?” Marcus Dunn had to have someone take over for him in theater, one of the nurses at the front desk had run to tell him it was a serious call on the line. Bernie even sounded like she may have been crying. It’s been years since he’s heard her like that. Many, many years.

“Char’s in theater. Serena just finished. Cole is with Mum on Otter.” Cam swallows, maintaining his composure. That’s all he can do at this moment. “They’re doing their best, but...” He doesn’t finish, glad the people on the other side of the glass aren’t able to hear him.

“I...I need to be there. Do you think...” Marcus trails off, sitting on the bench in the middle of the staff locker room. “Do you think Charlotte would be bothered by that?” He bites his lip, “I’ve been attempting to mend bridges. Truly, I have. Your Mum...she shouldn’t go through this alone.”

“She isn’t alone, but...I’m certain your presence would be appreciated.” Cam pauses, “As long as you don’t start anything with Char’s boyfriend or try and make Cole-”

“There’s a time and a place, Cameron.”
“Good.” He nods a little, “Like I said, Mum is upstairs with Cole. Char’s still in theater. Just...be prepared, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Marcus goes quiet for a moment, when he’s sure his son may have ended the call, he finally says, “Cameron, I love you, son.”

“Love you too, Dad.” Cam quickly touches the screen of his mobile, pushing it back into his pocket and folding his arms once more.

Marcus does his best not to cry. It’s hard. He’s treated his daughter terribly in recent years, but not intentionally. Only that he wanted the best for her. Quickly changing into his business wear, he wishes he had brought something else. Something casual. Doesn’t matter. He makes quick work, immediately heading to Holby City Hospital.

Last he walked these halls, the nurses were gossiping about him, about his marriage, and the reason for its dissolving. However, all that dust was settled and they had both moved on, for the most part. Stepping over to the nurses’ station, he leans over the desk a little, “Cole Dunn.” He pauses, quickly remembering Charlotte given her son a last name to match that of her mother, “Wolfe...Cole Wolfe.” He follows the guiding hand toward the bed, curtain pulled around the hospital bed. Carefully stepping over to the area, he quietly pulls back the curtain, seeing his ex-wife with her eyes closed, head back. His grandson resting against her as she absently rocks them both with her foot.

He can’t help but look at her, still beautiful after all these years. A part of him even taken back to seeing her after a long day of work, holding a small Cameron to get him back to sleep. Closing the curtain behind him, he grimaces at the scratching sound.

Bernie lifts her head, her eyes bleary, but she makes out the figure of her ex-husband. “Marcus.” Her voice quiet, only just above a whisper. “They’re-”

“Still in theater, I know. I’ve spoken with Cameron. Serena’s just finished though.” Marcus nods a little, carefully taking a seat on the edge of the bed, across from her chair, which she had tipped back to its rear legs. “How is he?” He nods his head toward their grandson.

“Concussion. Basilar fracture with mild CSF leakage. We haven’t had a chance to test his walking or smelling abilities. We’ll have a go at that when I take him home later, but...MRI looks good considering.” Bernie explains, her voice calm, “Ryan is tending to him, however...I don’t know how much longer he’s going to be able to go on.”
“Ryan? Charlotte’s boyfriend?” Noticing her small nod, he continues, “I didn’t realize he was a doctor.”

“Pediatric consultant here.”

Marcus nods, “Good...I know he’s like a...” He pauses a moment before continuing, “a father figure when Cam isn’t around.”

“He sees Ryan far more than he sees Cameron.” Bernie exhales slowly, letting it go. There’s something in the air between them, knowing someone for as long as they have one another, Bernie knows she doesn’t ever need to sugar coat things for him anymore. “Cam said he’s glad I didn’t see Char when she was brought in.”

“From the news reports, the attacks were bad, Bern. Were you able to see Serena?”

“Yeah...Henrik Hansen is performing her surgery.” Bernie swallows, leaning her head back again and absentely bringing her hand up to rub along the resting baby’s back. “You know, when Elinor died, Serena’s daughter, I watched her and her ex-husband getting along for a change. Both seated on either side of her bed, each holding a hand. I...I prayed, to whatever celestial body would listen, that I’d never have to experience what she was going through at that point in time.”

“If the time comes, we’ll make those decisions together. However, I don’t believe we’ll ever need to. Char is...an enigma. She isn’t to be messed with.” Marcus huffs a quiet chortle to himself, “If death comes to collect her, she’s going to give him one hell of a fight.” Noticing his former wife’s sad smile as she gazes toward him, “Not to mention, she has you in her...and you’re a tough old bird.”

“Quite right.” Bernie carefully moves the blanket a little when she feels the boy rubbing his face against her. “We tried to get him to eat a bit, but he wasn’t interested.” She motions to the IV pole and saline pack on a pole behind her, “He needs the oxygen more than he needs to chew, so it’s perfectly fine with me.” A small oxygen mask covers his tiny face, a purple rhinoceros painted onto it. “Say hello to Grandad, Cole.”

Marcus leans a bit closer, seeing the large brown eyes looking back at him, raccoon marking bruises on the skin around them. “Hey there, big guy.” He keeps his voice low, seeing a subtle smile from the boy behind the mask. “Everything will be okay.” He can feel himself growing a bit upset. *Please, Charlotte, don’t leave this boy without a mother.*
Chapter 115

Chapter Summary

When Marcus attempts an apology to his daughter's beloved, Jason interrupts in search of answers to his questions.

Cameron returns with disastrous, life changing news.

Chapter Notes

What? A chapter posted on a Friday?

Not mad, just like certain things to happen on the Saturdays instead of Wednesdays and I'm trying very hard to lay things out. You'll thank me later. Also, I figure this fandom can use as much love as we're capable of right now.

I think I may write chapter summaries now. Might even go back to write them for other chapters.

“Alright, mate, I know you want Gran. I know.” Ryan rubs the infant's back as he sits with him in on a metal bench right outside the room. Serena was up from recovery and, luckily, Henrik Hansen made the call that they would find the Wolfes space to stay in the same room. “We’re going to wait out here and give her and your Nan a few minutes.” He carefully adjusts the mask over his face, wishing he could take whatever pain the boy was feeling from him. “Got you situated with a new drip with some more pain meds, so you should be feeling a bit better soon.”

Marcus carries the cardboard cup carrier over to the man, “Coffee?” When the young man peers up toward him quizzically, “I don’t know how you take it so I stuffed my pockets with sugar packets and prepackaged creamer.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“I did.” He lowers himself to the chair next to the man, “Upon our last meeting, I really...took the piss. I just...want the best mate for my daughter and I didn’t understand at the time...that person was you.” Marcus tilts his head to the side, “So, allow me to give you this coffee as a token of my apology.”

Ryan smirks slightly, honestly surprised the man is making any type of effort, “Four sugars and one
“creamer.” When the man gives him a look, “I know it’s a lot of sugar, I hear it enough from Char.”

“No matter. I’ve got you covered.” Marcus holds the cardboard tray on his lap, “Bernie said something about taking Cole home tonight. Do you think that’s going to be possible?”

“All he wants to do is snuggle and sleep at the moment. If she wants to take him home, they should be fine.” Ryan lifts his head when he sees Jason briskly walking toward them, “Jason, hey.”

“Cameron phoned me. He said Auntie Serena, Charlotte, and Cole were in the big attack.” Jason seems confused and incredibly agitated, unable to stand still. He was at home with his wife. They had planned to eat take away and watch old movies on the telly. They were planning for weeks.

Marcus looks over towards the young man, remembering him from when Charlotte was pregnant and they had all eaten pizza together. “Jason, it’s good to see you again. Care to have a seat with us?”

“No, I don’t really know you.” Jason tilts his head, “Unless you’re about to tell me that they’re all deceased. It was a very bad explosion, Greta said it would be statistically inevitable that they would be hurt severely, if not dead.” He glances between the two men in front of him, “Greta is never wrong.”

“Jason.” Ryan says calmly, “Though Serena was hurt badly, she’ll be fine. She’s already out of theater, and out of recovery, in the room just over there.” He points to the room across from them, “Your Auntie Bernie is meeting with her now, we’re just letting them have some quiet time together.” He watches the young man, edging up the blanket enough for him to see, “Cole is right here, he’ll be fine in time too.”

Jason is moving less, listening to the words from the man on the bench, “And Charlotte?”

“Still in theater.” Marcus answers, a pensive tone to his voice, “There’s been little information, but Cameron is-” He notices his son slowly walking down the hall. He stands, stepping past Jason. “Cameron.” Seeing the look on his son’s face, he swallows, “Cam-”

Cameron looks to his father. “It was, uh...she never gave up.” He watches as Jason rushes into the room that was previously mentioned to him, “it’s going to be touch and go for a while. She’s not out of the woods yet, but...so far she’s alive.”
“Oh, that’s...” Marcus begins to grin, “That’s great.” He suddenly wraps his arms around his son in an embrace. After holding onto him for a moment, he holds the young man at arm’s length, “why... why are you so downcast?”

“Because she died, Dad.” Cam licks his lips, his face pained as he says the words, “She was dead. They called it.” He shakes his head, “I watched as Dom Copeland stuck his hand in her chest and massaged her heart back to beating, but she was dead.”

Marcus folds his arms, backing away a little, his expression falling as well as he moves to lean against the wall, “You shouldn’t have been watching, Cam.”

Bernie slowly pushes open the door, her eyes glassy, having been listening to Jason and his worries over the past few moments. Taking in the looks on Marcus and Cameron’s faces, she begins to shake her head, “Someone please tell me what’s going on. Jason is a wreck...and I’m not far from it...”

“Char’s in Recovery.” Ryan speaks up, keeping his hand securely on Cole’s back, “She pulled through surgery and I’m sure they’ll bring her up before you know it.” He doesn’t want to worry the woman even more than she already is. “Everyone, and everything, is fine.” He ignores the look of the men around him, “We’re all, I reckon, is a bit spent after today...for more reasons than one.”

She keeps her hands at her side, feeling a bit out of sorts. Bernie can tell something is being held back from her and her eyes focus on her son, “Cameron.”

“Yeah.” Cam lifts his head to meet his mother’s eyes, “He’s right. Char’s fine.” He knows his mother can tell he’s not telling her everything, and he probably won’t admit anything to her just yet. “Ange Goddard was lead surgeon. I’m certain she’ll be up to speak with you soon.” He stands, wiping his suddenly clammy hands against the legs of his scrub pants. “I’ll come help you with Jason.”

Bernie nods absently, turning away from the group of men and returning to the relatively dim room. Serena resting in the bed. Jason in a seat across from the bed, rocking furiously. “Now, Jason.” She crouches in front of him, “Calm down.” She sighs a little. “You don’t need to speak, but you can listen.”

“Jason, she’s in Recovery.” Cameron bites the corner of his lip, standing behind his mother. “Charlotte’s in Recovery.”
She sighs, standing, “There’s no getting through to him when he’s like this. Just let him go for a few moments.” She returns to the spot next to Serena’s bed, carefully taking hold of her hand. She reaches up with her other hand to gently adjust the sleeping woman’s hair. “Where would he have gotten that Charlotte died?”

Cam licks his lips absently, standing up straight, “Because she did.” His voice hoarse, the whole thing affecting him more than he believed it would. “If Dom Copeland didn’t see a subtle heart twitch, it would have been a wrap, Cole would be an orphan, and you’d be in the same boat as her with Elinor.” He nods his head towards his stepmother in the room. “That’s how close it was, Mum. He just happened to see it as he was starting to shut machines down.”

“She hasn’t though, so let us not dwell on it.” Bernie swallows, quickly bringing a hand up to wipe away a tear that threatened to escape her eyelid. She lifts her head a little, thinking back to the words Serena had told her when she was brought in, No X-Rays for Charlotte. It all starts to click. “Do me a favor, contact Fleur Fanshawe, have her give your sister a once over.”

“She pelvis wasn’t injured. It was strictly her upper torso that was.”

“Cameron, for the first time in your life, just do as I say.” Bernie doesn’t glance toward him, her voice a bit more harsh than she intended. She watches as he takes his leave. Bernie stays with her unconscious wife and nephew who has checked out for the most part. “Jason, would you like to come over here?”

Hearing his name, Jason lifts his head, looking toward his aunts. He stands slowly, cautiously moving next to Bernie, feeling her reassuring hand in the middle of his back. “Is Auntie Serena in pain?”

“No.” Bernie’s voice quiet, just above a whisper, “she’s on medication so that she isn’t.”

“She’ll have more scars.”

“We all have scars, Jason. Some are external, some are internal, and some people have both.” Bernie answers carefully, “They’re what make us who we are.” The corner of her mouth turns up slightly, “I have one from when my daughter was born, I have a few from my time in the military.” She pauses, “Why are you worried about her scars?”

Jason reaches out, carefully touching Serena’s forearm, “They’ll make her remember.”
Chapter 116

Chapter Summary

Fleur helps Cameron see the positive side of things.
Ric takes over Serena’s Medical Director duties while she’s incapacitated.

“Poor girl.” Fleur Fanshawe folds her arms over her chest, “My favorite of the Werewolf’s cubs.” She takes in the sight of the young woman in the hospital bed, hooked up to various monitors.

“I won’t take offense to that.” Cameron stands at the foot of his sister’s hospital bed. “Serena told Mum No X-Rays for Charlotte before she was taken into theater. What did she mean by that?” He pauses, “It was like...Mum just got it. She was adamant I call you.”

“Missing the obvious are we, cub?” She moves closer, gently assessing the young woman’s pelvis and lower abdomen. She hisses when she sees the gauze protecting the fresh sutures applied during surgery. “Come on, cub, think.”

Cam stares, watching her, “She’s pregnant?”

“Ding ding ding, give the boy a prize. Knew you weren’t that daft.” Her voice soft, slowly drawn. Fleur smirks a little, removing the small doppler from her pocket. It was a commonplace since she had become a consultant for Obs and Gynae. “Smoke inhalation, double pneumothorax, multiple cracked ribs.” She uses an electric doppler as opposed to her own stethoscope.

“Dying on the operating table.” Cam mumbles before he slowly begins to grin, hearing a soft heartbeat, “and she’s still pregnant.”

“Obviously, I’m going to need to do an internal ultrasound to better assess the situation. She’s sustained some...very intense injuries, if not long lasting ones. If this pregnancy continues without incident, she’s going to be extremely high risk...and we both know she isn’t going to like that.” Fleur pauses, raising an eyebrow, “Is the father that handsome consultant in the children’s ward? I’ve heard the rumors. Dating the Werewolf’s daughter can be dangerous, can’t it?”

“Only if he ever attempts to lay a hand on her.” Cameron answers quietly, “I missed my opportunity
with the last one...it isn’t going to happen again.” He slowly folds his arms over his chest, “I know him...we went to school together. He really, really cares for her.” Cam clears his throat, “Cole’s still small, but...they’ll manage with another one.”

“*If the boyfriend even knows.*”

“So, what...what is the end game here?” He looks to his sister again, “Tell mum? Wait for Char to wake...if she wakes? Tell Ryan?” Cam shakes his head a little, “Even after surgery, Ms. Fanshawe, her chances aren’t very good.”

“Are all of the Wolves miserable?” Fleur lifts her head, adjusting the hospital gown before looking toward him, “Last time you gave up on your sister, what happened?” She knows he won’t answer, but she continues, “You continue to act as if she’s already dead. Given up on her so quickly...yet again.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Then stop acting like it.” Fleur reaches into her pocket, obtaining the packaged alcohol swab. She tears it open, using the cloth held inside to clean the head of the doppler before sliding it back into her pocket. “She needs champions and positivity. Instead she has you mucking about like you’ve a funeral to plan.” She shakes her head, “All three of them lived. You should be thrilled. Other people were not so lucky.”

Cam glances to the consultant again, “Have they...Do they know how many-”

“Fifty-six and counting, many people missing. They haven’t tallied the injured yet.” The consultant sighs, “At least, not that I’m aware of.” Lifting the patient file from the basket at the end of the bed, she makes note of her findings. “I’m going to wait until she’s upstairs for the internal, I heard someone saying Wolfe cub and Serena will be in the same room together. How did her surgery go?”

“Good.” Cam nods, almost absently, “She um...It went well.”

“Good.” Fleur offers him a soft smile, “She’s a dear friend.” The woman nods, placing the file back into the basket at the end of the bed, “However, I must take my leave.”

“Thanks for-“
“Anything for that delicious Serena...and her family. This one is my favorite, as I’ve previously stated, so obviously I’ll tend to her again.” Fleur nods, “Have them contact me once she gets comfortable in the other room.” She steps closer to Cameron, about to pass him, but pausing instead, “Wolfe cub.” When he glances toward her again, she continues, “Positivity goes a long way.” She reaches up to pat his upper arm, finally stepping away.

Cameron looks down to his sister again, listening when a staff member tells him she’ll hopefully be transferred within the next couple hours. He folds his arms, feeling a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you okay, Dr. Dunn?” Ric asks calmly, with the young man’s absent nod, he continues, “If you’d like to head back to the rest of your family, I can stay with her.”

“I’m fine.” Slowly shaking his head, Cam continues to focus on his sister’s bruised face, “When my nephew was born, I had promised her that...I’d be there for her more. That I’d be a good uncle and all that.”

“Haven’t you been?”

“No, not really.” He watches as the AAU consultant rounds the bed, beginning to take observation stats on Charlotte as he continues to listen. Cam licks his lips, “Like, I wanted to spend time with Cole twice a week, at the very least. Last I saw him, besides today, had been a bit over a month between visits. He remembered me, of course, but...” He trails off a little, “I let my sister down again.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to make it up to her if you wish, but I think you’re being a bit hard on yourself.” Ric shakes his head, straightening his posture to continue speaking with the young man. “As doctors, as surgeons, we must train ourselves to separate from our cases. Give our patients the best possible care objectively, without growing attached. When it’s family, that sense of coldness just isn’t an option.” He tilts his head slightly, “and it makes us start to think. That’s the dangerous part.”

“My family...has never really been close. Not really.” Cam just continues to speak, everything he’s seen today starting to catch up on him, “then Serena came along for Mum...and Mum like...” He shakes his head slowly, “it was like she emerged from her cocoon and could be her real self. Surprisingly, that was...this loving person who lets her grandson climb all over her, and smiles all the time, and...gives hugs. I hardly recognize her...and that’s a great thing.”

“Sounds like it would be.” Ric glances back to the young patient in the bed, carefully taking hold of
“When Cole came...everything was just...” Cameron looks as if he’s at a loss for words, “he was the missing piece. Changed us all for the better, made us all much more close knit.” He lifts a hand to his face, absently rubbing his palm against his own stubble, “we got dangerously close to that changing again today. I don’t know what we would have done...how we would have coped...”

“You want to be there for Cole, no better time like the present. Your mother will be busy and I’m betting, if I assess your file, you’re due some time off.” Ric watches him, “While Serena is incapacitated, I’ll take over her duties as interim Medical Director. Please, do yourself a favor, Dr. Dunn.”

“I think that would be best, yeah.” Cam nods, “I can...help Mum with Cole.”

“Great idea.” Ric offers him a subtle smirk, hoping he’s helped the young man just a tad bit.
Chapter 117

Chapter Summary

Ryan reveals what his real intentions were for his weekend getaway with Charlotte.

Cameron realizes his desire to bond with his nephew may be too little too late.

Bernie has a tough time keeping her emotions in check.

“They’re keeping them sedated, which...is probably for the best, honestly.” Bernie nods slowly, sitting in a chair at the foot of the two beds. “You didn’t need to stay, you know.”

He does. He needs to show Charlotte how much she means to him, regardless if she’s awake or lucid enough to know one way or the other. Ryan offers a sad smile, “You know, this weekend...it was going to be our weekend. I was...uh...” His mouth dry, he feels like he could cry at any minute. Slowly, he reaches into his pocket, removing a small velvet box and offering it to the woman next to him.

Bernie takes the box from his hand, opening it carefully, “You were going to propose marriage.” She says quietly, slowly glancing towards the young man, “It’s absolutely beautiful, Ryan.”

“She said once that she didn’t like diamonds. That they were overused and overrated...then she went into some tirade about their harvesting and socioeconomic inequalities of the country...etcetera, etcetera. You know how she is when she gets excited over something.” Ryan swallows, staring at the woman he loves as she rests, “Champagne Morganite, sourced by the artesian that created it, with a rose gold band. I was very careful to get her something that...I did a bit of research on.”

“Probably for the best.” She yawns, placing the velvet box on the man’s leg, giving it back to him. “Though I don’t want to, I reckon I’d best head home. I know Cole isn’t going to be terribly happy to spend time with Uncle Cameron at the moment.” Bernie offers the man a gentle smile.

“I’m going to stay.” Ryan says quietly, “set up in the corner over here.”

Bernie’s face softens ever so slightly, touched by his behavior, “You know, you should take a look at her file.” She offers him a gentle smirk, “I think you may be pleasantly surprised.”
Ryan furrows his brow, slowly leaning over toward the basket at the end of the younger woman’s bed.

She doesn’t wait to see his expression, taking her leave anyway. The thought rolling in the back of her head that her daughter’s pregnancy was, more than likely, not going to come to fruition due to the other trauma her body sustained. However, some sort of happy news at the moment wouldn’t be a bad thing.

Bernie makes her way to the car park, glad she was able to change her clothing beforehand while Marcus sat with Charlotte and Cameron with Serena. The house isn’t far from the hospital, something she was always thankful for. Noticing a few of the lights on in the house when she pulls up into the driveway, she smiles a little to herself, checking her delicate timepiece that she keeps turned to the inside of her wrist. “Just after midnight.” She says to herself aloud, making her way into the house.

“I gave you medicine, I tried to give you a bottle, which you didn’t want. I don’t know what else I could do to make you happy, Cole.” Cameron paces, watching the boy tearfully pout from his place on the sofa. “Not to mention you won’t go to sleep.” Cole’s chin begins to tremble, a tear finally escaping his eye.

“You could pick him up.” Bernie watches the pair, stepping in more when the infant reaches a chubby grabby hand toward her. “Okay, little one.” She carefully lifts him up, the boy instantly relaxing against her.

“What did I miss?” Cam shakes his head, honestly wanting to do better.

“Nappy.”

The young man glances up toward the ceiling, a sigh releases from his lips. “I should have known that.”

“You’re tired. So is he.” Bernie answers calmly, motioning with her hand toward the infant’s supply bag for Cameron to grab her what she needed. “We’ve all had quite the day, Cole more than either one of us.” She’s extra gentle with the boy, his blackened eyes causing a ping in her heart. Taking the nappy once it’s handed to her, she makes quick work of it, careful not to jostle the boy too much, as she usually does, playfully. “You said he wouldn’t take a bottle for you?”
“Wasn’t interested.” Cameron shakes his head a little, smiling ever so slightly as he lowers himself into one of the high backed chairs. He shrugs, “He doesn’t really know me so—”

“Oh, stop that.” Bernie sighs, making sure she gives her grandson’s head extra support as she lifts him from the sofa, “We should be using masks, actually... with that CSF leak and all.” Placing her lips against the boy’s hair as he grips onto her, “Cole, want some Puffs?” She sighs when the babe seems a bit confused, “Cam.” She’s amused when her son has already placed the snack container on the table. Shaking some into her hand, she offers them to Cole, who eats them eagerly.

“You seem surprised.” Cam studies the two, especially at how comfortable the both of them are with one another. Sometimes, he remembers his mother with Charlotte when they were growing up. His mother always worried about his sister when they were young, he thinks he had something to do with the way she came into the world. How terrified his mother actually was at the time, though she wouldn’t admit it.

“He didn’t remember what they were.” Bernie answers quietly, sighing, “Did you, by chance, allow him to walk at all?”

Cam shakes his head negatively, “I know he isn’t too steady yet and didn’t want to risk a bump to the head.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” She carefully lifts the boy up, “We’ll try tomorrow. What time is your shift?”

“Mr. Griffin told me to stay with my family. I have time I need to take, so it works out.” He gives a soft smirk, “That way, we can take turns with Cole when we go to hospital.” Cam folds his arms across his chest, “I need to help you more and what better time than the present.”

“Who would have thought all it needed to take was your family’s near death experience?” Bernie raises an eyebrow, teasing him slightly. She looks back down to her grandson, finding her own chin trembling. *Hold it together,* she tells herself. She sniffs her nose, shaking her head at herself in a vain attempt at stopping her emotions.

“It’s okay, Mum.” Cameron nods a little, feeling himself growing a little teary eyed just by the sight of her. He slowly moves over to the spot next to her, carefully wrapping an arm around her upper torso. “We’re tired, remember?” He feels her quick huff of amusement. “We’ll decide how to deal in the morning.”
Bernie nods a little, “Agreed. I’ll keep him with me tonight. It’s your decision whether to take Char’s room or Jason’s.” She clears her throat, sighing when Cole turns his head from the Puffs in her hand after having only eaten them for a few moments. “I’m going to try a bottle with him again upstairs.” She swallows, “This shouldn’t have happened with them. They’ve all been through enough as it is.”

“Agreed.” Cam glances over to the boy, “Cole just looks like he was in a fist fight.” He leans over a little, “Cole, can you say You should see the other guy?”

She nudges her son playfully, “Cole, can you say Go to bed, Uncle Cameron?” Bernie lifts her grandson into her arms fully, feeling as he rests his cheek against her shoulder. She stands slowly, moving to the kitchen, but knowing her son is watching her from the doorway. “Yes?”

“If you want to sleep, I can try keeping him with me.”

Bernie shakes her head, “No, no. It’s okay. He isn’t going to sleep for you yet if he hasn’t already.” When her son appears a bit dejected, she continues. “I won’t be able to sleep tonight unless I’ve my hand on him. So, it’s a win-win if he stays with me. Thank you for your offer, though, I do appreciate it.”

Cam nods a little, “Night, Mum. Don’t stay up too late.” He takes his leave, knowing his mother probably would not sleep at all tonight. He wants to be better. He owes it to all of them to be more involved, help out more. He begins to think of things to occupy his nephew for tomorrow and whether they should take his stroller as opposed to the carrier. Things he, otherwise, would not have ever bothered with. If Cameron is going to be hands on, he’s going all in.
Chapter 118

Chapter Summary

Fletch notices an unexpected call light.

Ryan helps Serena out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fletch moves into the room when he notices the patient call light. Neither of these women were conscious yet, or so he thought. Keeping the women in one of their more secluded rooms, it made tending to them easier. The Wolfe family, as a whole extended unit, is quite important to the staff of Holby City Hospital. Giving them a bit of special treatment was a given, they deserve it. “Call light?” His brow furrows, hearing the choke-like sounds coming from the older woman.

“She’s starting to come to. Freaking out over the tube, causing spasms. Natural stuff.” Ryan nods, keeping a reassuring hand on the woman’s forearm, “I can remove it, but I’d just like another set of eyes here, if it’s alright with you.” Seeing the Nursing Director’s subtle nod, he turns his attention to the woman in the bed, “Serena, it’s Ryan. Just calm down. I’m taking it out now, but I’m going to need you to stay quiet for a bit.” Being cautious, he deflates the balloon holding the tube in place before sliding it from her windpipe.

Pressing an oxygen mask over her face after, Fletch watches his friend, “Deep breaths, love. You’ve been through quite an ordeal.” Seeing Serena’s confused expression, “You were in an explosion. Uh...many people were injured.” He starts to gently take her vital signs, making the notes for things in the book.

“An attack was made on a department store while the three of you were shopping.” Ryan tells her gently, “You were all injured, some more than others, but you’re all going to be fine.”

Serena reaches her IV laden hand up to her face, pulling aside her mask, “Where’s Bernie?” She whispers, her throat hurts.

“Cole suffered a concussion and a bit of smoke inhalation, Bernie knew he wasn’t going to be cooperative for Cameron. So she’s gone home with him. They’ll all be back in a few hours, I reckon.” Ryan nods, “You suffered some serious injuries, Serena. You were impaled with a piece of metal in your side.” He had taken the time to read over her file as well, something to do instead of listening to the steady beeping of their heart monitors.
Swallowing, the silver haired woman watches him, “Charlotte?”

“Her injuries were a bit more serious, but she’s right here.” Ryan moves over, letting her look to the bed next to her. The young woman still on her breathing tube. “I think she just wants the nap, honestly.” He smirks a little, trying to lighten the situation.

Serena doesn’t respond, knowing she can’t look at the woman too long without becoming upset herself. She glances over toward Fletch, “How many injured?” Her voice hoarse from her own smoke inhalation, it almost surprises even herself.

“You don’t need to know that right now and you should be saving your strength.” Fletch makes eye contact with his friend, “after you’re proper rested, I’ll tell you everything you want to know. Deal?”

She begins to smirk from behind her mask, leaning her head back, amused by the man. “You know I’ll get it out of someone.”

“I have no doubt, but it ain’t gonna be me tellin’ ya.” He leans down, softly placing a kiss against her hairline, “You really gave us a scare back there. All three of ya. Don’t do it again, eh?” Fletch offers a playfully stern look toward her before moving over to Charlotte, it was time to take her observation signs anyway.

Ryan lifts his head, looking over to the nurse as he absently slides his hand to hold onto Serena’s. When he feels her squeeze his palm, he looks down, “Director.” Though it’s her official title within the hospital, it’s also grown as a sort of pet name for her with him. Seeing her worried glance, he licks his lips in thought before quickly averting his eyes from hers, “You’re both on Darwin. Mr. Hansen saw to it that you were both placed in the same room. Makes things easier for the rest of us, that’s for certain.”

“How bad is she?” Serena asks, her eyes drifting over toward her step daughter. The sight reminding her of Elinor before she and Edward removed the tube. It frightens her, but she wouldn’t dare display that to either of these men, not now.

“Nearly all of her ribs were broken requiring some thoracic reconstruction, double pneumothorax because of damage from the ribs, a lot of internal hemorrhaging.” Ryan nods, looking over toward his girlfriend, “Wouldn’t know all that from the outside though, bruising and scrapes.” He chuckles softly to himself, it’s better than crying, “and, somehow, she’s still pregnant.”
“My giddy aunt, I was right.” Serena smiles slightly before holding the oxygen mask to her face again, just feeling weak overall, which shows in her voice. “Please, don’t get your hopes up.”

Swallowing, Ryan continues, “I know. Ms. Fanshawe said it isn’t terribly far along at all.” He looks over toward the young woman again, “She said it was probably Char’s saving grace, well… the baby’s saving grace. Too small to be affected.”

She wants to hold the young woman’s hand, to know that her stepdaughter isn’t cold, to know she isn’t dead like Elinor. Serena inhales slowly, ignoring the dampness of her own eyes. Her chin stiffens, shifting the mask again. “Move me closer.” It wasn’t a request, it was something she knew Ryan could hear in her voice because he immediately starts to follow her orders, lowering the bed safety rails between the women.

Fletch watches the display, “She really is going to be fine, Serena.” He’s impressed by the young surgeon’s dedication and willingness to just do as asked. He nods to Ryan before walking around the beds and placing a hand on the younger man’s shoulder, “We’ll give you a minute.”

Hearing the door to the room close finally, Serena feels a tear finally escape her eye, unable to hold her emotions back once they’re finally alone. They’ve been through an ordeal together, yet again. They’ve also both survived once more. Serena carefully reaches her hand over, carefully placing it into that of her stepdaughter’s. Yes, she’ll be more certain of their survival when Charlotte decides to open her eyes, but the fact that her hand is ever so slightly warm gives Serena a scrap of hope.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, Alex is never going to be a thing ya need to worry about here. LOL. What a joke.

Holby writers really cocked that one up, didn't they?
Chapter 119

Chapter Summary

Bernie has a hard time seeing the attack footage.

Cameron has an interesting phone call.

Bernie slowly sways with Cole as they stand in the kitchen, letting him feed himself with his own bottle. Her own eyes closed, not sleeping throughout the night, not expecting to either. If it weren’t for Cole, she’d probably be a bigger mess than she is currently.

Cameron bounces down the stairs of his mother’s home, giving a glance to the kitchen. He watches his mother and her gentleness with his nephew for a moment before finally speaking, “Just received a very interesting phone call.” He tilts his head for her to follow him to the lounge.

“From?” She continues to be very careful with her grandson.

Turning on the television, Cameron goes to the station that Nicky McKendric had told him to put on. Video of the shop on Juniper Street fills the screen, paramedics and police trying to save burnt and otherwise injured individuals.

A balding, middle aged man speaks to reporters after leaving the hospital, using crutches as he goes. The name Ron Paulus at the bottom of the screen as he speaks. “My angel! I haven’t the slightest who she was. I just know she saved a whole lot of us. I’ll keep singing her praises until I find her identity, then I’ll sing them louder. I want to thank her personally. I just hope she made it out, I heard about the ones that didn’t.”

A broadcaster begins to speak from the same setting, a young woman with a dark complexion and buzz shaved blond hair starts to speak, “This is not the first time we’ve heard stories of this thus far unidentified woman, The Third Floor Hero, as many have come to refer to her. Many of the victims that were brought here to Holby City Hospital, and were on the third floor during the attack, are singing her praises. One of our sketch artists worked with Mr. Paulus in order to obtain a visual representation of this young woman using his physical descriptions of her. If you recognize this young woman, please contact our help line at-” She rattles off a telephone number as a detailed charcoal picture is put onto the screen.

“Bloody hell.” Bernie stands a bit straighter.
“That’s Charlotte.” Cam begins to chuckle, a grin growing across his face. “That’s Char, Mum.”

“I reckon it is.” Her voice quiet as she slowly shakes her head, “She isn’t trained, Cameron. I don’t understand how-”

“When we were young, she wanted to be just like you. She’d loan books from the library about trauma training and even gave some thought to being a paramedic if she didn’t get into the Army...that one didn’t last too long. It wasn’t close enough to what you were doing.” Cameron shakes his head a little, “Do you want to call the number or should I?”

“Neither of us.” Bernie continues to just stare at the television screen, all of their coverage focused on the attack on Juniper Street. It begins to remind her of her time in Afghanistan years ago and the many suicide bombings she not only treated victims of, but also saw happen. She looks away, seeing the security cameras of moments before the attack started, “Turn it off, please.”

Cam senses a shift in his mother’s disposition, quickly doing as she asked. There’s silence in the room for a moment before he finally speaks, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She clears her throat, glancing down to Cole as he lazily continues to feed himself his bottle. She absently uses her other hand to stroke the babe’s hair, “Can you hold him while I-”

“Shower and dress.” Cameron carefully takes his nephew into his arms though it’s obvious Bernie didn’t want to let him go, “Take your time. Fletch text me a bit ago and said everything is quiet.” He didn’t. He said Serena was awake, but he’ll let his mother be surprised for that. “Everything’s fine.”

_How many times have I heard that by now_? Bernie wonders, nodding a little before leaving the room to ascend the stairs. She rubs her hands over her face, exhausted and spent. Cole didn’t sleep much the night prior, spending most of it doing his low painful cry. She would medicate him, sure, but it also tore at her heartstrings. Bernie moves into the bath, turning the shower on before disrobing. She uses the sound just to mask the sound of her own sobs.

Cameron continues to hold his nephew when his mobile begins to sound, quickly silencing it when he realizes his musical ringtone bothers his nephew, “Sorry, mate.” He answers it when he notices his step-cousin’s picture filling the screen, “Jason, what’s up?”

“This isn’t Jason, it’s Greta. I’m using his mobile.” Greta stands on the balcony of their flat.
“Greta, is something wrong?”

“I don’t have your number on my mobile, but Jason does.” Greta says quietly, “he’s...distressed.” She lifts a hand up, tucking her hair behind her ear, “How injured are Serena and Charlotte? I didn’t want to phone yesterday because I thought everyone would have been very busy and Jason refuses to speak about it.”

Cameron takes a moment to listen, making sure the shower still going before answers, “Actually, Serena woke very early this morning. She’s, apparently, vocal and...lucid. She’s doing incredibly well.” He smirks a little, before letting it fade, “Charlotte...Charlotte’s still unconscious.” He won’t go into too many details, remembering what Fleur Fanshawe said about his negativity. “I believe in her.”

“What were her injuries?” Greta asks cautiously, “I can calculate her chances of survival if-”

“I don’t want to talk about that. She’s alive, Greta, and we’re all counting on her to stay that way.” Cameron shakes his head, “I know you mean well, but it isn’t something we all want to think about.”

“I apologize if I’ve offended you.” She glances through the door of the balcony, seeing her daughter dancing to something on the television in the lounge, “I want to help in some way and I don’t know how to. Marcus Dunn, I assume someone related to you, is picking him up on the way to hospital in a bit, but...will you keep an eye on him while you’re all there?”

“Of course.” Honestly, Cam is surprised his father is stepping up in any way he’s able. “You’re welcome to stop by as well. It isn’t exciting or anything, but...it’s nice when we’re all together.” Family bonding, something Cameron Dunn never really had growing up. An occasional dinner or Christmas with extended family, but nothing where anyone bonded. “Also, I reckon Serena would love to see Guinevere at some point.”

“I’d prefer if you asked her first. Possibly we could do a video conference later?” Greta lifts a hand, tucking another piece of hair behind her ear.

“I think that’s a perfect idea. We’ll talk to you then.” Cameron quickly ends the phone call when he hears the shower stop, looking down at the boy in his arms, who is now just lazily holding onto his bottle as he gums the rubber teat. “We should get you dressed, I reckon.”
Chapter 120

Chapter Summary

Cameron shares a memory from his sister's past with his mother.

Bernie decides hiding what happened will make thing easier in the end.

Chapter Notes

Same day as the last chapter.

Bernie closes her eyes on the elevator as they travel up to Darwin, using the employee elevators. It was easier that way and avoided most of the press that was looming outside. “Nearly a hundred people died and all they want is a story.”

“They want hope, Mum. They need to find the silver lining.” Cameron pushes the stroller with his now sleeping nephew contained within it. “Third Floor Hero has a television movie written all over it.” The corner of his mouth turns up in his own amusement, “I might even watch it.”

“She wouldn’t want that.” Bernie keeps her hands at her sides as they step off the elevator, knowing her son isn’t far behind her. “She doesn’t like the attention, surprisingly.”

“Surprisingly?”

“Do you remember when she joined the theater club?” Bernie slows her stroll to walk alongside her son through the hallways.

Cameron nearly snorts with his amusement, remembering clearly, “She froze.”

“She loved Shakespere. Even before joining. So, when they gave her the role of Cordelia in King Lear, she was absolutely over the moon.” Bernie explains, “Dress rehearsals were fantastic. She was amazing. They had three that were open to the public before the official opening night. I was on leave, so...I went to them all. She doesn’t know about that.”
“Not when they showed it for real. That’s when Dad and I went.” Cam shakes his head, “when I say froze, Mum...I mean she opened her mouth to speak and only squeaked. The whole place erupted in laughs and she, literally, needed help moving off the stage. Felt bad for her, but...it was funny at the time.”

“I wonder if she can still do it...rattle off some Shakespearean verse.” She watches her son when he pauses outside the door, “Coming in?"

“I’m going to get Cole all set up. Wrap him with a blanket and—”

Bernie furrows her brow, giving her son another look before pushing open the door to the room. Ryan Anand still asleep in his chair in the corner of the room. Luckily, it doesn’t seem like he snores, unless he just isn’t really sleeping. Walking in more, she sees her wife, reading her own medical file, causing a relieved grin to spread across her face. “Campbell, you’re supposed to be resting.”

The sudden voice causes Serena to jump ever so slightly, “Oh for god sakes, no need for the stealth here, darling.” Serena beams, setting the file down onto her lap and eagerly accepting the kiss from her wife. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“As are you.” Bernie pecks another kiss, “Been awake long?”

“A while.” Serena nods, motioning to the file, “I keep looking for answers about what happened, but I’m unable to find any. Just that my chest appeared as if resuscitation measures were taken before we arrived and the paramedics denied that they did anything while in route to hospital. Which means it would have had to happen while in the shops.”

Lifting her head slowly, she glances to her daughter, still unconscious and intubated. She decides not to go into it currently, returning her gaze to her partner, “I apologize for not being here when you woke—”

“Mr. Anand told me Cole was injured.” Serena keeps her voice down, knowing the man was still sleeping and giving a subtle nod in his direction, “He never left, not once.” He had edged her bed back to its original position when she worried the young woman may need medical intervention of some sort at some point, luckily she hasn’t thus far. “I’d rather you were tending to Cole, honestly.”

“He’s here. He and Cameron.” Bernie licks her lips a little, a tilt of her head toward the door, “He looks a bit worse for wear, and I suppose Cole could look better as well.” It earns her an amused
nudge to the forearm from the woman in the bed, “Cam said Marcus is bringing Jason around soon. However, Jason is a bit...”

“Jittery...like he doesn’t know what to do with himself?” Serena nods a little, “after Elinor died, he didn’t know how to cope or grieve. Remember? Alan helped him with that...as did you.” She feels tired, but won’t admit it, having been nodding off periodically

“I remember.” Bernie nods absently, “he’s worried about the pair of you. We all are.”

Serena glances over toward her stepdaughter, “broken nose on that one at least. Ryan and Fletch refuse to give me her file to read over.”

“Good, you should be resting.” She smirks at the men’s care of her wife, not wanting to upset her.

“Have you read it?”

“Yesterday.” Bernie nods, slowly moving to stand between the beds. She leans down, placing a soft kiss to her daughter’s hairline and a hand to gently stroke the young woman’s cheek. She feels her mobile vibrate in her pocket. Bernie reaches down, bringing it to her eye before declining the call. Then another in quick succession, she sighs.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” Serena watches her wife’s actions.

“Don’t need to.”

Cam pokes his head in, smirking a little, “Seems someone called the tipline. My mobile is blowing up.” He pauses, his eyes widening as he offers a sympathetic frown, “that was a terrible pun that was completely unintentional and I apologize.”

“Excuse me.” Bernie stands upright, moving quickly to the door, and pushing her son back out to the hallway. She waits for the door to fully close behind her before speaking with him, “I don’t want Serena knowing about all of that right now.”

“You think no one is going to mention the Third Floor Hero is her stepdaughter?” He smirks, almost bitterly. “She’s smart, Mum. She’s going to know that we’re hiding something from her.”
“Because if Charlotte doesn’t make it, I’m going to lose two people. One physically, one mentally. That’s why.” Bernie shakes her head, her voice cracking ever so slightly. She places her hands to her hips as she turns away from him a little, “Did you ever once think of that? She doesn’t remember the time after the explosion...up until waking this morning. I know she’ll, more likely than not, begin to slowly remember things. That’s what happens after traumatic events. However, she doesn’t need to know all of that right now.” She swallows, “if you could text and inform everyone else before they arrive, that would be appreciated.”

“I can do that.” Cameron nods, knowing how much it hurts his mother to even consider the prospect. “We need to stay positive. I know you and I are both realists, but...if there’s a time for optimism, this is it. Yeah?” He places a hand on her forearm to garner her attention, “Mum, do you agree?”

Bernie nods absently, her eyes glassy as she meets that of her son’s. Eyes he inherited from her, eyes he shares with his sister, and his nephew. “For Cole...he has Serena and I, but...he needs his Mum.” She swallows, tilting her head to the side. “Come on. Ryan’s sleeping, but...I reckon we can all manage. Room is big enough.” She glances away to quickly wipe her eyes. Clearing her throat, Bernie continues, “This room is usually used for VIP patients. Celebrities and high profile government officials.”

“I’d say Charlotte is a celebrity now, wouldn’t you?” Cam waves his eyebrows, earning a playful scowl from his mother as he moves past her, carefully pushing Cole’s stroller into the room.
Chapter 121

Chapter Summary

Marcus is surprised by his daughter's partner.
Charlotte does her best to appease her son.
Bernie and Marcus work together to better understand their daughter.

Chapter Notes

Same day, quite a few hours later.

Charlotte listens to the room around her, calm voices. Voices telling stories of when she was younger.

“Oh, you remember that?” Marcus smirks, “You didn’t believe she would do such a thing, but when school staff told you it was some rude children having a laugh at an older man with Down Syndrome, you never even questioned it.”

“First of all, she fought off three boys, two of which were bigger than her. I was impressed. Second, she tended to the older man after the fact, helped him pick up the contents of his bag of groceries after the boys had made him drop them.” Bernie explains, “Third, she kicked the largest boy in the face. Honestly, I was impressed with her.”

“And darling Charlotte never once was punished. I defended myself and I got a month in my room without parole.” Cameron smirks.

“That’s because you never knew when to shut up.” Bernie smirks a little.

“Still doesn’t.” Marcus shakes his head, offering Cole another berry from the small container Bernie had packed for the boy. It amused him just how devoted his ex-wife was to their grandson, her maternal instincts finally making themselves known. Whether Bernie liked it or not.
Ryan watches the boy as he holds onto things, wandering about the room. “He’s unsteady.” The man leans forward, resting his elbows near his knees as the boy toddles over to him. Cole offers the man a large, tired grin. “You a bit dizzy, bud?” He can’t help but reciprocate the emotion, giving him a gentle smile as the boy reaches up to be held. Ryan gently picks Cole up to his lap, unsurprised when the boy leans against him. The babe vomits all over him, the entire contents of his stomach. Ryan doesn’t jump or immediately push the boy from his lap, as Marcus had thought he would, quite the opposite. “It’s okay, mate.” He rubs the boy’s back, sighing softly as he starts to cry.

Bernie rises from her chair, carefully lifting the Cole into her arms, “I knew it was too good to be true.” She mumbles, starting to remove the boy’s vomit covered clothing out of instinct. “I’m so sorry, Ryan.”

“No, it’s okay.” Ryan shakes his head, “Luckily, I have a change of clothes in my locker. Just check his eyes for me again. I don’t expect anything to be abnormal, he has a basilar fracture after all.” He begins to remove his dress shirt, nodding toward the floor, “I’ll get this wiped up before I go.”

“I’ll phone maintenance.” Bernie shakes her head, glad she had many extra clothes for the boy, mostly all pajama one pieces.

Cole continues to sob against his grandmother, his small hand reaching toward Charlotte with a frantic, yet low pitched cry of “Ma” in his mother’s direction. It causes tears to begin forming in his Gran’s eyes, but she does her best to ignore them.

Charlotte hears her son, how could she not? Her face twitches and she can feel that she’s intubated. Probably for the best really. Her eyes try their best to open, anything to let Cole know that she hears him. Open, damn it.

Ryan can see Bernie trying her best to hold it together, “Bernie, go on and get a coffee. I’ve got him.” He says gently, “I’ll phone maintenance.” He pulls a paper bag they often supply to patients from the cupboard in the room, shoving his dirty dress shirt into it. “Take a breather, it isn’t a big deal.”

Honestly, Marcus is surprised. There’s a sense of trust between his ex-wife and his daughter’s current boyfriend. “He’s right, Bern. Serena is going to be asleep for a while, per the pain medication supplied, and we can tend to Cole.” His voice is gentle, giving a quick glance to Ryan, “unless you want to stay for Ry’s disrobing session as well.” Anything to lighten the mood of the room.

Cole lifts his head, noticing his mother’s eyes opening. His husky voice filling the air as he crying starts to subside. “Ma.” He reaches again, this time getting his grandmother to look in the same
“Char.” Bernie moves closer to her, a nappy clad baby in her arms, his bruises more prevalent than before. “Charlotte, you’re in hospital.” She’s doing her best not to cry with relief, her voice cracking, “Everything is okay though, darling.”

Charlotte focuses on breathing. Just breathing. She wants to speak, but is too weak to even motion for them to remove the tube. Honestly, she’s not even certain they should at the moment. She’s numb. Mostly numb. Her throat doesn’t even spasm around this tube, causing her to wonder if it’s to say something about her injury, or her as a person. Don’t make yourself laugh, you loon. If only she were telepathic. Her mother to one side with her son, her father and boyfriend to the other.

Cameron stands at the foot, a large grin filling his face. “Welcome back, darling Charlotte.”

Char offers him a lazy thumbs up, not able to lift anything. Her eyes going back to her son, My sweet boy, I’m so sorry. Her internal monologue continues, knowing no one else can hear her. Where’s Serena? Her finger begins to slowly make an S onto the hospital blanket covering her lower half using the pad of her middle finger. Very lazy, very slow.

Marcus catches it, “Serena’s in the bed right next to you.” He assumes that’s why she was doing it. “Bit better off than you are, but getting some much needed rest currently.” He sees the subtle smirk around the tube, knowing that’s what she wanted to know. “I’m certain she’ll be thrilled when she learns you’ve awakened.”

Cameron watches his sister as his mother begins to carefully change his nephew’s clothing next to him, “You win, Char.” He begins to grin, “You got Mum and Dad to be civil to one another again...and all it took was a close brush with death.” Hearing her low moan, he begins to chuckle softly, “I commend you.”

“Cameron.” Bernie scowls toward her son, finally returning where she was, between the beds. Her grandson on her hip. She watches as her daughter focuses on keeping her eyes open, on blinking. Normal things that otherwise shouldn’t take much thought. “If you’re tired, go ahead and sleep, darling. There’s no rush to waking.”

Charlotte wants to shake her head negatively, but realizes she isn’t able to. This sucks. She can feel something on her face, besides the tube. A bandage? She isn’t entirely sure. Char just wishes someone would tell her how things got so bad, feeling tears starting to form in her eyes. She manages to use her hand again, drawing a question mark on the quilt. At least she thinks it’s a question mark. She hopes that’s what her father sees.
“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I don’t know what you’re asking.” Marcus answers calmly, seeing her frustration. Another question mark. “A question...”

“What happened?” Bernie offers after a moment, garnering a slightly raised eyebrow from the young woman, as well as her attention. “There was an ordeal when you went shopping.” She keeps things simple in case her daughter has a tough time retaining, “You were among the last to be rescued.”

*I know that.* Char just blinks, unable to vocalize anything. She wants to know of her own wounds, but resigns to finding that out later.

“You helped a lot of people, Char.” Cameron says finally, believing the threat of his sister’s loss of life now over. “People are alive because of you.” His sister furrows her brow slightly, obviously not understanding. He sighs a little, “When you’re a bit better, I’ll go into it.” He moves away from the bed, taking a seat in one of the chairs.

“I told you not to bring up one thing.” Bernie mumbles a little toward her son before looking to her grandson relaxing against her. “I’ll have Ryan to get you a vitamin drip again.” She doesn’t want her daughter being kept from the loop, “Because of the concussion, he’s having a hard time keeping food down.”

Again, Char grows more curious about what her brother said. She doesn’t understand. Doesn’t remember all that. Her mother seems cross with her brother, and tired in general. *Cole is his grandmothers’ boy anyhow.*

Ryan returns finally and immediately goes to Charlotte’s bedside. He’s shocked when Marcus steps aside for him, but takes his girlfriend’s hand and leans down to kiss her eyebrow, “When you’re able to, we have much to discuss.” He gently strokes her hand with his thumb, “we’ve plenty of time...and I’m not going anywhere.”
Chapter 122

Chapter Summary

Serena has a hard time with the prospect of physiotherapy.

After trying to hide information of the attacks from her wife, Bernie finally reveals a few things.

Chapter Notes

About a week after the attacks.

“Why are you so nervous? I’m the one at my place of work without a stitch of makeup on my face.” Serena sighs, leaning back in the wheelchair, pillow held to her midsection to place over her scars as she moves. “There’s no reason they couldn’t have come to the room.”

“Just because you’re in a VIP room, doesn’t mean you should act like it, darling.” Bernie smirks a little, amused by her partner. She leans down a bit to the woman’s ear as she speaks, “Besides, with or without makeup, you’re absolutely beguiling.”

“Flatterer.” Serena mumbles, hoping no one looks her way as they’re en route to the room. “We shouldn’t have left them.” She goes to clear her throat, which she quickly realizes is a mistake, and grimaces after the fact. She had been here for days now, far longer than she’d ever want to be. “I’m tempted to sign myself out against medical advice.”

“You will not. You’re staying with Charlotte while I take the boy home.” Bernie knows she’s manipulating the situation in a way, but whatever works to keep her in place is what she’ll do. “You have your reading tablet with some books downloaded to it. What else could you possibly need?”

“There’s only so many books a person can read.”

“Campbell...” Bernie warns, her tone remaining playful. She slowly backs the woman into the therapy room, noticing the news on the television. Still covering the attack. Over and over.
Serena isn’t really paying attention at first, but notices her partner acting bizarrely when she rushes to the television, changing the station. She furrows her brow slightly, motioning to the seat next to her with a tilt of her head. It was very quick and she’s curious as to why Bernie would act that way. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“I’d rather you didn’t see that, currently.” Bernie answers quietly, finally lowering herself in the chair next to her partner, “I know you probably think you can handle it, but...usually you can’t. I just...don’t want you to have to experience that if it isn’t necessary.”

“I understand and appreciate your desire to protect me,” Serena snakes her hand over to take hold of Bernie’s, “but I’m going to need to see it at some point.”

“I know...just not today.” She leans back in the chair a little, carefully folding her legs.

Quiet falls between them, watching some of the other patients over the course of ten to fifteen minutes. Some tending to their own physiotherapy by slowly walking on treadmills, some slowly doing revolving stair-masters. Serena swallows, anxiety growing within her, “Can we...can we just go, please? I’m not ready for this.”

Bernie glances over to her, nodding slightly, “You sure?”

“We left them alone...Charlotte and Cole...with Marcus.” Serena’s voice breathy, filled with nervous energy, quick. “Physio can come to the room. I’d prefer they came to the room. I don’t want to...I don’t want to make a fool of myself in a room where any of my constituents could possibly see me poorly.”

“Serena, plenty of your constituents were in the same theater where your chest was cracked open...and the CEO’s hands were elbows deep.” Bernie shakes her head a little, “You went through a traumatic event. You shouldn’t-”

“Bernie, please.” Her eyes are glassy, ready to shed tears, even though she’s trying her very best to hold it all together. Serena shakes her head a little, “I’m not a fast healer like you. I need more time...I’ll go later.”

Bernie squeezes her wife’s hand reassuringly, “I’m going to speak to the therapist. We can reschedule when you’re ready.” She leans over, kissing the woman’s temple before standing and walking away to speak to the young man.
Serena glances to the television when it changes again, the news feed. A picture of Charlotte flashes across the screen, catching her attention. Then another and another, “That’s...that’s my-” She glances around, “Bernie.” She calls, motioning to the television when she earns the woman’s attention again. “Why are they...” She can’t quite make out the words on the screen and the volume is too low to hear the story being reported.

“That’s our cue to go.” Bernie rushes to her partner, giving a nod to the therapist that they would speak later. “Not a worry.” She begins to move her wife’s chair, carefully pushing her through the entrance of the room to the hallway.

Serena leans a hand down to take hold of the hand portion of the wheel, “Wait a moment. I want to know-” When Bernie tries again, Serena lets out a quick shout, gripping the wheel area again, forcing her wife to stop. The corridor virtually empty.

“Serena, are you okay?” Bernie crouches in front of her wife, sighing a little, “why did you-”

“You’re not telling me everything.” Serena scowls, “They were showing pictures of Charlotte on the screen. One was even from Christmas. Why are they so interested?” She shakes her head, when the blonde stands again, walking over to lean against the wall. “Berenice.”

Bernie swallows, staring ahead a moment to form her thoughts before glancing back to her wife, “She saved some people...and it may still cause her to lose her life.” She clears her throat, folding her arms across her chest, “and all they can say about her is that she’s the daughter of a world reknown surgeon. Not her story, not that she’s a single mother. Nothing.”

“So, this is guilt with you.” Serena watches her wife, “you want her to have the recognition-”

“I want her to not need a breathing tube. I want her to open her eyes again. I want to hear her voice.” Bernie shakes her head, “and, yes, I want her to have the recognition. Not me. I don’t think I’m asking for too much.”

“You aren’t.” Serena shakes her head a little, her mind beginning to flash memories of the day of the event. Charlotte kneeling above her, blood dripping from her mouth, a worried expression on her face. The young woman feeling the side of her neck before placing a wet cloth over her nose and mouth. “Wait...you didn’t want me to know...because she saved me too.”
She doesn’t think she can answer or what she should say. Bernie glances away again, lifting a hand to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “I was going to say something when Char woke, but...she’s yet to wake again. Unless she’s doing it while we aren’t aware. I don’t know.”

Serena swallows, watching her wife, “why didn’t you want me to know?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Bernie shakes her head, motioning to the hall, “Will you allow me to take you back to the room?” Seeing Serena’s subtle nod, she returns to her place behind the chair, pushing carefully. She doesn’t know what else she could possibly say. “Cole’s CSF leak appears to have subsided, luckily. Ryan’s prescribed him anti-nausea meds...poor boy isn’t too keen on solids just yet, but I’ve managed bottles of formula...and various apple sauce packets.”

Serena notices her wife is attempting to change the subject, mostly to protect herself, “Something is better than nothing. He’ll want his Puffs again soon.” Serena nods a little. “All the calls to your mobile you were receiving, they were from various news outlets, weren’t they...”

“Yes.” Bernie answers quietly, “I don’t have any information for them though. I’m also rather...busy for the moment.”

“Has Cole slept in our bed every night?” Serena knows her wife well, knows she’d want the boy as close as possible, hearing the low, soft chuckle from the woman, she continues, “does he still sleep with my leopard print shirt?”

“The chartreuse colored one as of late. It was in the hamper. I reckon your smell was no longer with the leopard one.” Bernie smirks a little, “I know he wants to cuddle with you, but I don’t want to risk it with your injuries. Can’t have him trying to crawl all over you only to pop a stitch.”

“It would be worth it.” Serena answers softly, feeling a soft kiss from her wife on the top of her head.
Chapter 123

Chapter Summary

Ryan continues to inform Charlotte of everything that is happening around her.

Cameron tries something to wake his sister.

Bernie fears the negative repercussions with her son's experiment.

Chapter Notes

Nearly 2 weeks after the attack.

“I know you aren’t really...awake at the moment, but it’s okay. I know you can hear me.” It has been nearly two weeks since she opened her eyes, and hasn’t opened them since. Ryan hasn’t left her side during all of it, he refuses to unless it’s for small chunks of time, and one of her parents are there with her. “Your Mums should be in soon. The Director is still slow moving and refuses to use a wheelchair. Unsurprisingly.” He gives her a recap of what is going on around her at least twice a day. “Cam bought he and Cole matching kits...and he’s been carrying him in a baby bjorn that he picked up.” He chuckles a little at the thought, “he’s gone proper mad, Char. You’d love it.” His smile fades a little, his chin trembling slightly. “You’d really love it.”

“No strollers for us, right Cole? We walk like men.” Cameron pushes the door open, smirking to the Cole as he walks through and goes straight to Ryan.

“Speak of the devil.” Ryan grins, leaning down to life Cole into his arms. “No carrier today?”

“Well, you all had a right laugh yesterday with it. So, I decided to forego it today.” Cam raises an amused eyebrow to the man before glancing over toward his sister, “Any change?”

“She uh...” Leaning back in his chair, Ryan does his best to hold it together. “She started miscarrying last night. Easy come, easy go and all that.” He sniffs quickly, managing to keep his emotions at bay for the most part. Only slightly able to hear them in his voice. “She was moaning and...I got all excited because I thought she wanted to talk, but...” He tails off.

“Oh, Ry...I’m so sorry, mate.” Cameron places his hands on his hips. Studying his sister for a
moment, walking closer to her, he gently takes her hand in his. “You know, I read some medical journals last night about coma patients and ways they were awakened. These mothers who would wake when they heard their babies cry. Actual findings in medical journals.”

“We’re not going to make him cry.” Ryan says softly, pressing a kiss to the boy’s hairline before gently rubbing his back.

“No, no, of course not.” Cam shakes his head, “that isn’t what I had in mind.” Sensing he’s piqued the other man’s interest, he continues, “Mothers oftentimes have a strong, emotional bond with their children. Even my own mother...who I fear has no emotions at all sometimes. They can feel with their child is injured or upset from miles across town. Again, read in legitimate medical journals.”

“I see where you’re going with this, but I don’t see your-”

“We’ve been keeping Cole from touching her all this time. We’ve been worried that he may try to climb all over her or...mess up a tube or something.” Cam shrugs, using his hands as he speaks, “all he wants to do is cuddle. The concussion leaving him a bit...worse for wear, as you know. He just wants to be held. Last time she opened her eyes, all Cole had to do was say her name.”

“So why not let him cuddle with her.” Ryan begins to smile a bit, standing carefully with the boy in his arms, “wouldn’t hurt to try. Especially since your parents aren’t here.”

“Yeah, I doubt they’d be too keen on it.”

Ryan moves to her more uninjured side, making sure there wasn’t anything the boy was going to lay on top of that could be important, “Cole, how about cuddles with Mum, eh?” He carefully adjusts Charlotte’s arm so Cole could lay more securely against her. Please, let this work.

Serena steps through the door, her wife wanting to get coffee for the room, she went on ahead. Slow and steady, but her speed was increasing day after day. A physiotherapist coming to the house each morning instead of forcing her to take treatment in a large room with many people. It worked better for her, even though she had to pay for it. “What are you doing?”

Cameron turns quickly, neither man hearing the door open. “Stepmum, come sit. We’re experimenting.”
“If he pushes on a stitch-” She starts softly, her eyes glassy from the sight before her. Serena doesn’t feel Cameron’s arm around her as he helps her take a seat. She bites her lip when Cole lifts a hand to gently begin tracing his mother’s facial features before nuzzling his face against her side.

“That a-boy.” Ryan lifts his head, looking to her monitors. Her heart rate increases ever so slightly, displaying her own joy...or, at least, he believes it to be her excitement.

Bernie attempts to carry a few cups without a cardboard cup carrier. She does this all the time. They’d offer her one and she still said she was fine. Carefully pushing open the door, she backs in, “Cameron, you left so quickly, I didn’t get a chance to ask you-” She pauses, noticing everyone’s gaze toward her daughter. “What’s going on?” She uses the over-bed table to set the drinks down, watching the boy on the bed with his mother. Any other time, she’d have lifted him, kept him from possibly hurting her. That’s what she did when he tried to cuddle up to Serena the first time.

“Look at the monitors, Berenice.” Serena says quietly, her voice just above a whisper. The room silent, other than the steady sound of the ventilator.

Moving closer to the opposite side of the bed from the boy, Bernie takes her daughter’s hand, knowing the boy needs time with his mother, regardless of her state. Since the incident, she’s had nightmares every night that each time she’s seen her daughter, would be the last time. This feels too real. “Pick him up.” She doesn’t want to break her strong exterior.

“It’s eliciting a response, Mum.” Cameron watches the woman, noticing her change in expression.

“It means nothing, Cameron.” Bernie scowls, “multiple medical interventions have been attempted and nothing has worked. However, her neural receptors are still active. She’s there, she’s just...stuck. There’s no real reason for her to still be unconscious.” Her voice breaks, “to put the hope of her waking on her son...Cameron...”

“He’s a baby. He doesn’t even care.” Cam blinks, “He doesn’t even know what’s going on. Cole’s just having a cuddle with his Mum.” They manage to keep their voices calm during all of this, “I know it can be upsetting-”

“You don’t-” Bernie starts shaking her head, still looking to her son.

“She’s my sister, Mum. She’s your daughter, but she’s also my sister.”
“Try anything.” Serena croaks, interrupting them. Her voice slightly louder than the others to garner their attention to snap out of their bickering. “The alternative is not something you would ever want to experience.” She blinks, slowly rising from her chair to stand at the foot of the bed.

Ryan lifts a hand to silence the room when he notices movement from underneath Charlotte’s eyelids. “I think it might be working.” He licks his lips, beginning to smile slightly, “Char...you’re in hospital. Everyone is here...except your Dad and Jason, they text to say they were getting breakfast before heading in.”

Serena furrows her brow, glancing to the man, “What?”

“Jason’s been having a hard time with all this and hasn’t wanted to bother you. So...Dad’s kind of been there for him. They’ve...gotten to be friends.” Cameron offers, “it’s weird, but it works.”

Ryan notices her hand gingerly take hold of Cole’s leg, rubbing the space with her thumb. All of her movements very subtle. His smile grows, “Cole’s had a proper bath-”

“Gave him one last night.” Cameron says proudly.

“And his Uncle Cam has...combed his hair into a mohawk.” Ryan continues, “they aren’t matching today though...and he didn’t bring the carrier. We walk like men , what does that even mean? Male infants don’t use strollers?” He leans down against the side rail, standing behind where Cole is. “If you wake, you can give him a hard time about it. Low hanging fruit prime for the picking, Char.”

Bernie watching the changes in her daughter, the subtle twitches on her face. Maybe there’s something to all of this.
Chapter 124

Chapter Summary

Jason helps his surrogate step-sister.

Marcus is amazed at the sudden turnaround.

Chapter Notes

Later on in the same day after the last chapter.

I figure Jac will be a bit happy about the situation...for a change. lol.

Jason reads from a book he borrowed from the library. He had promised Ryan and Marcus that he’d sit with Charlotte in their short absences. Auntie Bernie and Auntie Serena left earlier when Auntie Serena was starting to feel a bit tired, taking Cole with them. It’s usually quiet here, in this room, with exception to the ventilator. Noticing movement in his peripheral vision, Jason lifts his head.

Charlotte takes hold of the security bedrail suddenly. Almost like someone who is falling and grabbing onto anything within their grasp for dear life. Her eyes wide open as she tries to take stock of her surroundings, becoming bleary from the brightness. She tries to move her stiff body.

“Are you awake now, Charlotte?” Jason asks casually, without any sort of excitement. He slips his bookmark between the pages before setting the book down. Standing, he moves next to the bed, but doesn’t touch her. “Are you very afraid?” When she doesn’t answer, he continues, “you look like you might be very afraid.”

She doesn’t answer him, unable to. She begins to gag on the tube within her mouth, bringing her hand to it in an attempt to pull it out. Char moves her hand again, gripping the blanket over her.

“I’ll press your call button.” Jason offers, reaching over to do just that. “You know, Greta said that you would probably die since you were asleep for so long. She said the likelihood of you awakening after two weeks of being in a coma was-” He pauses when she reaches through the space between the rails toward him, Jason gingerly takes her hand, not really knowing what to do in this instance.

Fletch pushes through the door leading to the rest of the unit, “What’s going-” He begins to smile
when he sees her large chocolate eyes trying to look over to him. “Charlie Wolfe, welcome back.”

“She doesn’t like to be called Charlie and she didn’t go anywhere.” Jason furrows his brow, pouting his lips slightly, not really understanding what the man is talking about.

Chuckling slightly, Fletch continues, removing the mobile from his pocket. “I’m phoning Ms. Naylor, see if we can’t get her to remove that tube for you. Just relax, darlin’.” He takes her other hand, speaking quickly into the mobile once the woman answers. “She’s on her way in. Jason, do you think you could phone-” Hearing a low moan from beneath him, he glances down to the woman, noticing her hand movement for him to wait. “Alright, we’ll see what Ms. Naylor says.”

“Finally decided to join the land of the living?” Jac pushes her way through the door, surprised to only see Jason standing there in an otherwise empty room. “Where is the entourage?”

“Mr. Dunn went to get coffee and sent Ryan to the on-call room to sleep, but he should be back very soon.” Jason explains, remembering clearly what Marcus had told him. “She looks frightened, why is she frightened?” He and Greta were working on reading displays of emotion as they’re rather difficult for them both. Just so happens this was one of the first ones he understood quickly.

Fletch moves around to the same side of the bed as the younger man, placing a hand on Jason’s shoulder, “She just woke up in a weird place where it’s all bright, feeling like she has a hangover. You’d probably be a bit confused too.” He offers a kind smile, “This is a good thing, Jason. A very good thing.” He begins to ready the oxygen tube to a face mask for their patient, watching closely.

“On the count of three, I’m going to need you to blow outward or cough. Either one, your choice.” Jac says, “if you can’t do either, this might hurt just a bit.” The redhead counts down, quickly and carefully pulling the intubation tube from the young woman’s throat and mouth, hearing her hard cough after. “Very good.” Jac sets everything aside.

“Now, just breathe regularly.” Fletch places the mask over Charlotte’s face, “don’t try to talk just yet, just breathe.” He moves past the group, leaving abruptly, but the group doesn’t ask questions.

“Jason, I picked you up some cocoa. I know you don’t fancy-” Marcus pauses, seeing the consultant in the room, standing over his daughter. He walks closer, seeing the young woman awake, smirking under the clear plastic mask. Marcus looks like he’s about ready to cry with happiness. “Hey, baby.”

Moving the mask for only a few seconds, Char whispers, “Hi Dad.”
Even Jac has a slight smile on her face at this point, “I assume you read her file, with a family of doctors, I have no doubt. She has extensive cardiopulmonary damage and, possibly, her vocal cords. We’ll have our ENT specialist up soon enough. I just want to focus on the cardiac and respiratory systems at the moment. Vocal cords come after...at least they do in my book.”

“We share the same book, Ms. Naylor.” Marcus offers a courteous half smile toward the cardiologist, “that being said, a question that will not warrant my daughter’s good graces, are you certain she’s okay without the ventilator?”

“So far, so good. We’ll keep an eye on her oxygen concentration, obviously. Continue with our fifteen to twenty minute observations.” Jac adjusts her position to stand where the young woman could see her better, “Charlotte, if at any time you feel overly short of breath, or feel as if you can’t catch your breath, push your call button immediately.” She meets the younger patient’s eyes, “You have a catheter inserted and you’ve been on a liquid only diet over the past week so there should be no reason for you to get up, currently.”

“Where’s my son...and Serena...” Charlotte moves the mask aside again to continue whispering.

“Bit roughed up, but they’re fine.” Marcus nods, “Cam and your Mum are tending to them both.” He starts to grin, his eyes sparkling.

“Don’t start crying, you sap.” She smirks a little, her gaze then shifts to Jason, who has returned to his book. “Jay, you okay?” Charlotte does her best not to chuckle when he gives an absent nod, having lost interest of what was actually happening in the room.

A moment passes and Jason glances up as he’s about to turn a page in his novel, “I’m glad that you aren’t dead like Elinor.”

“Me too.” Char lazily winks toward him. She really wants to see the people she was in the attack with, wants to know they are actually safe. Unable to just take a person’s word for it, even when that person is her own father. Honestly, she’s surprised to see him here.

“I should call Bernie.” Marcus nods, reaching into his pocket to fish out his mobile.

Charlotte places her hand over his arm, ever so subtly shaking her head negatively, “Let her get a decent rest and be surprised in the morning.”
It causes Marcus to pause, honoring her wishes, “I don’t know who is worse with surprises, you or your mother.” He sits at the foot of the mattress, still staring toward his daughter, paper cups in his hand. “Oh, Jason, here. Hot cocoa.” He offers it to the young man, “Warm cocoa.” He corrects.

“Thank you.” Jason takes the cup from the man, bringing it to his lips. “Cold cocoa.”

“Chocolate milk.” Char whispers, noticing the consultant is taking her observation levels, “Well, Ms. Naylor?”

“There are people, quite a few, holding a vigil of sorts for you outside...beyond the gates.” Jac explains, trying to distract the younger woman a bit, “nightmare getting into work, honestly.”

“For me?” Char furrows her brow with a sense of confusion, “Why me?”

Marcus glances to the doctor before looking back down to his daughter, “Charlotte, do you remember anything about the attack?” He shakes his head slowly when she continues to give him a confused look, “if you don’t, it isn’t an issue. It’s incredibly common, especially with the injuries you sustained.”

“I remember we were looking for swim costumes...” Charlotte attempts to lick her lips, only to be met with a mostly dry tongue.

“It also seems you may have fallen or had something fall on your face or head, I’m not completely certain. May have contributed to your slight memory loss. You had a small break to your nose when you came in. Nothing as serious as they thought it was downstairs.” Jac motions to the top of the bridge of her nose, “if you’d like plastics to have a look, we can arrange that. It doesn’t seem to be causing issue at the moment. Just some bruising.”

“If you didn’t look like Bernie enough before...” Marcus smirks, “a regular doppelganger now.”

After rolling her eyes at her father, Charlotte glances toward the consultant, “can I have a nasal cannula instead of this?”

Jac is surprised she knows the correct word for the other attachment, but doesn’t put much stock in it.
Family of doctors. “Not right now, maybe tomorrow morning.” She opens the cabinet next to the bed, obtaining the piece her patient asked for and setting it on the side table. “Ready to go when you wake.”

“I think I might surprise you, Ms. Naylor.” Char smirks, placing the mask back to her face. Her eyelids heavy even though she hasn’t really done much of anything. She just feels so tired, so heavy, so spent. She doesn’t feel much of anything body wise though. No pain. She just focuses on her breathing.

Smirking, Jac moves to the end of the bed, lifting her chart from the basket container, ready to input a bit of information. “You already have, Ms. Wolfe.”
Ryan finally asks a question he's been holding onto.

Char realizes her heroic efforts may have caused a personal loss.

Chapter Notes

Same night as the last chapter.

Ryan races up the stairs, skipping the elevator entirely. Adrian Fletcher had rushed to the on-call room to tell him to get to Darwin. Nothing else, he had already started running. All the possible what-ifs raking through his mind. Getting to Darwin’s ward, he notices Marcus and Jason getting onto the elevator. Strange, he says to himself as he starts to walk briskly the rest of the way. Pushing open the VIP room door, Ryan is met with virtual silence. No ventilator.

Moving closer to the bed, a part of him is worried of what he may actually see. The room is much dimmer than it was when he had left a few hours ago. The soft hiss of oxygen remains. This is strange. For nearly a fortnight, this room has been bright and active for many hours, going well into the night. All while Char remained motionless.

Charlotte turns her head slightly once she hears the door open, smelling the air, she smiles a little when she recognizes his cologne, “Mr. Anand...” She whispers, a part of her is afraid of what her voice may sound like just yet. When the man finally comes into her field of view, appearing as if he’s seen a ghost, “did you have a nice nap?”

“All right?” Ryan couldn’t be happier honestly. He wants to gather her up in his arms, give her the tightest hold, the deepest kiss, but knows he couldn’t possibly. Leaning in, he softly presses his lips against hers. “I can’t be too rough with you. I’m afraid what I’m seeing is a dream.”

“I am a dream.” Char smirks, raising her brow. “I had to tell Dad and Jason that I was ready to go to sleep. Dad just kept staring and...it was getting a bit creepy, but I know he didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Why are you whispering?”
“Easier.” She places her hand on the back of his when he brings it gently to her face, she won’t tell him that it hurts to speak just yet. Char can see the tears filling his eyes, “it’s okay. Why does everyone keep-”

“I thought I was going to lose you.” Ryan says honestly, “Finally found a girl I’m head over heels in love with and I was going to lose her.” He licks his lips, leaning down again to just place his face next to hers, keeping an arm around her, but is sure not to put any weight on it in a sort of hug where he knew he wouldn’t hurt her doing so.

Charlotte moves her hand over to run her nails through his thick black hair. She’s never seen him like this. Truth be told, they haven’t been together terribly long just yet, not really. However, they’ve just clicked for one another on a different level. “If I did take the long dirt nap, you would have kept on. You would have been fine and...hopefully gotten a tattoo of my face or something...”

“Just one?” He doesn’t want to think about it, about what could have happened. However, Ryan knows that Charlotte’s way of trying to make him feel better is to make him laugh, having noticed a while ago that there were some emotions she wasn’t comfortable with. He stands back up, rubbing his hands over his face to quickly wipe away his tears before giving her the opportunity to really see them. “I guess your Mums are on their way in.” Seeing her subtle negative head shake, he starts chuckling a little to himself, “I should have known you’d want to scare the shit out of them and call it a surprise.”

“Why change things up now?” Char moans a little, trying to adjust her position. “Can I see my file?” She motions toward the end of the hospital bed with a nod of her head. She’s in quite a bit of pain, but doesn’t want to say anything to her partner.

“No.” Ryan shakes his head slowly, knowing she wants to know exactly what was mended within her. “There isn’t anything there that I’m sure you haven’t already been told. You don’t need to know the juicy details right now.”

Charlotte swallows, “I’m...” She pauses, “after I had Cole, they gave me this large...pad to wear. Even though he was a cesarean birth, the body...did what the body does.” She stops herself, “as I’m sure you might know...you’re a bloody doctor.” She takes a moment to just breathe before continuing, “I’m wearing one again.”

He had a feeling that’s what she was referring to, causing him to glance away a little. “I’m...so sorry, Char.”
“Some things just...aren’t in the cards when they happen.” Char nods slowly, “I’m sorry too.”

“You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for. Ms. Fanshawe was surprised it lasted as long as it did with the injuries you suffered.” Ryan takes a seat at the edge of the bed, “It changes nothing.”

“I was going to tell you during our holiday weekend. I wanted you to know before anyone else.” Char bites the corner of her mouth again, “I just found out the other...” She pauses, shaking her head to herself, “Dad said I lost time. So...bit longer than the other day...I guess.”

“So, we would have both had something.” Ryan trails off, smirking to himself. Feeling her eyes still on him. He reaches into his pocket, having just resorted to carrying the engagement ring without the box that he had purchased for her, not wanting to leave it home while she was here in this bed. “I was planning to give this to you during our weekend...which was shaping up to be a pretty important one for us.”

“And it was important, but...for the wrong reasons.” Charlotte just focuses on her breathing, honestly. She’s starting to feel tired, though she doesn’t really understand why since she’d been asleep for so long.

“Watching you tap dance between life and eternal sleep over the past week, only...strengthened my feelings for you. My biggest fear was living my life without you in it.” Ryan shakes his head, “Still is.” Looking toward the woman, noticing her heavy blinks. He shows her the ring between his fingers, “I know it seems soon and out of the blue, but...will you marry me, Ms. Wolfe?”

Char swallows, finally using her gravel-like voice, “M...Marry you?” She winces from the pain in her throat, but refuses to push her call button for pain medication. Really everything is beginning to hurt. “Why?” The last time a man asked her to marry him, it wasn’t a question, it was an expectation. Things became more violent after.

“I...” Ryan’s smile starts to fade, “because I love you.” His tone soft, a sense of hurt within it as his attention turns toward the door in the room.

She goes back to whispering, her eyes glassy, “I was engaged before. It...it didn’t go very well for me.” When Char sees the disappointment starting to flood his face, his hand moving to place the ring back to his pocket, she continues, “but you aren’t him. You could never be him...and that’s a good thing.”

Ryan looks back over toward her again, a smirk slowly growing on his face once more, offering the
ring to her, “Not even a diamond...like you said you didn’t want.” He pauses, “I worked with an independent artesian who only uses ethically sourced materials...and told her exactly what you would like.” Licking his lips a little in thought, as she places her hand in his. “there’s an inscription inside.” Ryan begins to slide the delicate ring onto her finger, “It’s...the exact coordinates and date of our first meeting.”

Charlotte starts to grin, taking his hand more after he finishes placing the ring onto her finger. “Of course I’ll marry you, you sap.”

“Good...because if you declined, returning this ring was going to be a tad difficult.” Ryan leans down, kissing her tenderly, but being sure not to be rough or keep her in the kiss for too long. He carefully places forgotten mask back onto the woman’s face, knowing this moment was going to be something they’d remember for the rest of their lives.
Chapter 126

Chapter Summary

Bernie gets a shock when they visit Charlotte.

Charlotte is unsure how to handle her parents' outpouring of emotion.

Chapter Notes

The morning after the last chapter.

To help understand what Char's voice sounds like currently, it's very similar to a female ghoul from the Fallout series. I know A GREAT MANY of you aren't going to know what that sounds like, so here is a link.

Also, double chapters today because people asked nicely. This means (because I had it lined up a particular chapter to happen on the weekend) that Wednesday will also have double chapters.

“Cameron isn’t going to be pleased that you left him to lie in.” Serena uses a cane as she walks along the corridor with her wife and grandson, mostly using it for stability as she heals.

“He’s been exhausted and you’ve been able to do more and more for yourself...” Bernie pauses, “Or rather, you refuse to allow me to do anything for you and, instead, push yourself unnecessarily.” She sighs, her eyes focused on Cole who walks with uncertainty ahead of them, as if he’s trying to maintain his balance. A pair of sunglasses strapped to his head since he had been having a hard time with harsh lights, as there often is in hospital.

“It isn’t unnecessary-”

“No? You argued with me about getting you coffee this morning.” Bernie glances to her partner, then ahead, noticing Adrian Fletcher leaning against the wall just outside her daughter’s room. “Fletch.” When the man shakes his head, not looking toward her, Bernie feels her heart drop. Quickly lifting her grandson into her arms, she runs a hand through her own hair. She doesn’t know if she can keep walking, doesn’t know if she can possibly continue.

Serena places a hand on her wife’s shoulder. “You have to see her, Bernie.” Her voice soft, she’s close to losing her wits. Everything is happening again. “We have to see her.”
Slowly stepping into the room, the curtain pulled to block the view of her daughter’s body. Bernie notices the ventilator is already off. She wonders how long it’s been like this. Lifting a hand to pull the curtain, she notices that the tremble within it. Her hands never tremble. She’s almost certain she hears a voice in the back of her head telling her, ‘any day now’.

Noticing her wife’s inability to do the task, Serena places her hand over her partner’s, “You’re not alone.” She slowly pulls the curtain back, only to be met with an empty bed. “What?”

Using her newfound deep, gravel-like voice, Charlotte sits in the chair opposite the bed, knowing her parents would be focusing on the bed and not the chair at the foot of it. “Gotcha.”

“Mr. Fletcher.” Serena calls out, only to see the man laughing just outside the door.

“If you saw the looks on your faces.” Fletch continues, nearly doubled over with amusement. When he notices the stern, unamused look of the Medical Director, he moves away slowly.

Bernie places her grandson on the empty bed, moving over to the chair. She stands in front of her daughter, placing her hands on either side of her daughter’s face. She studies the young woman, looking into her eyes. Yesterday, she was still virtually dead to the world and today she’s playing pranks, getting back to where she was before. “Are you trying to give me a bloody heart attack?” She finally says after a moment, her voice breaking.

“If you did have one, we’re in a good place for it.” Char seems a bit surprised when her mother slowly sinks to her knees, removing her hands from her face, laying her head on her daughter’s lap. Charlotte gently sweeps the hair from her mother’s face before running her short nails through the woman’s hair, never seeing her behave this way to anything before. Bernie seems so overcome with relief that this is the only reaction that feels right for her. Charlotte resorts to her former whispering since speaking hurts when she does it, “Mum...” The sight makes Charlotte’s heart break. Lifting her head, she makes eye contact with Serena, who is still doing her best to hold it together. “A cane?”

“Oxygen?” Serena gives a nod toward the tube in the wall.

“At least yours goes with that hair.” She notices her stepmother playfully roll her eyes. “I had to bribe Fletch with a fiver just to help me get out of bed...which I’m hoping you have because I’ve come up short.” Charlotte’s eyes are damp, she’s uneasy, resorting to jokes to lighten the room in any way possible. “I didn’t realize how much it would take out of me...after over a week of not moving, but here I am.” She isn’t terribly comfortable with all the emotion coming from these women and it
shows. “No one will tell me anything about what happened, not really. I know there was an accident, an explosion, but—”

“Because it isn’t important.” Bernie mumbles, finally lifting her head and wiping tears from her face. She slowly starts to stand, her arms folding over her middle after.

“Ms. Naylor says there’s a vigil at the gate for me. Candles and all that.”

“I said it isn’t important, Charlotte.” Bernie reiterates, moving to the bed to let Cole onto the floor to toddle around, “the important thing is that the three of you are safe.” She focuses on her grandson, not wanting to miss if he has a fall, “or as safe as you possibly can be.”

Charlotte makes eye contact with her stepmother, an unspoken understanding between them that they’d need to speak without Bernie present. “Okay, I’m sorry.” She glances back toward her son, who her mother is now following about the room. “So, I became engaged last night.”

“You didn’t...” Serena begins to grin, “to Mr. Anand, I presume?”

“Nah, Nurse Fletcher. I figure I’ll just add Cole to the rest of his brood and he’ll be none the wiser.” Char begins to smile in return, taking time to just breathe through the nasal cannula, “Of course it was Ryan.” She places her hands on the arms of the chair, ready to lift herself up, only to be stopped by her own inabilities. “Can you press the call button? I’m just going to have someone help be back into bed.” She notices Serena do what she asked, feeling herself grow more and more uncomfortable with each passing moment.

Bernie grabs her daughter’s file from the end of the bed, giving it a once over, “you feel okay?” She continues to keep her eye on her grandson, the room isn’t terribly large, but enough for the boy to explore a bit.

“Cole.” Char ignores the question as she watches her son as he moves around, trying unsuccessfully to open various cupboards in the room. “My sweet boy, what are you doing?”

Cole glances to his mother when he hears his name, but doesn’t really recognize her voice. She doesn’t really look or smell the way she usually does either. He waddles over to his Gran, holding onto her leg and hiding his face as the older woman continues to read his mother’s file.
Charlotte had never realized that she may not appear the same, only what her father and Ryan have said to her, she hasn’t seen herself since waking. My son is afraid of me. “When can I go home?” Her foot on the floor beginning to bounce.

Serena analyzes the young woman’s anxious energy, “Charlotte, you need to be able to pass a lung capacity test to a certain degree...which I don’t forsee happening for at least a few more days.” She’s cautious as she speaks to her stepdaughter, the room heavy as it is, “I can see the difficulty you’re currently having.”

“I’m fine.” Char does her best not to look at anyone.

Fletch finally opens the door to the room, “I’m sorry for the delay. There was an issue with-”

“I expect you to answer quicker in the future.” Serena interrupts him.

“Of course, Serena. I apologize. Needed the crash cart on the other side of the ward.” Fletch glances to the downcast young woman in the seat, “Ready to get back into bed?” He nears her, noticing her tremble as he helps her stand. “Just focus on me, Sweetheart, we’re taking our time.” Fletch is incredibly gentle with the young woman, “we’ll be ballroom dancing before you leave here.”

“Promises...promises.” Charlotte focuses, holding her breath as she tries to keep her balance, which isn’t doing her any favors. Her chin trembles, hating every moment of this. Hating being unable to do much for herself. “I want to see my file. Will you tell these people to let me read it...for the love of Christ...” She’s frustrated, angry that they continue to treat her as if she doesn’t deserve to know anything. At least, that’s how she feels her family is treating her, whether it be true or not.

“Charlotte, that isn’t necessary.” Bernie scowls toward her daughter.

“To you, mother, to you it isn’t necessary.” Charlotte doesn’t look to her mother, as she continues to focus, hardly moving anywhere except for Fletch to edge her along.

“I’d like to remind the both of you that there is a baby in the room.” Serena interjects, keeping her voice calm as Cole nears her. She’s unable to lift him at the moment and it pains her. She understands wholeheartedly what her stepdaughter is experiencing, even though Charlotte’s chest injury was a bit worse than her own. “Can we please keep level heads?” Honestly, she’s only ever seen Charlotte like this once before, the night Anders Hero died.
“Your heart rate is rising, Char. I’m sure your Mum will let you read it in a moment.” Fletch carefully lowers her to the bed, gingerly swinging her lower body around to help her lie down without needing Serena to move from her spot on the edge of the thin mattress.

“Would you lot mind if I had the room with Char for a moment?” Bernie finally speaks up, closing the folder and returning it to its former place at the end of the bed. “It shouldn’t be for long.”

“Of course.” Fletch nods a little, “I’ll need to do her obvs when you’re-“

“I’ll do them.” Bernie nods, helping her wife stand. “Fletch, could you carry one of the chairs to the hall for Serena?”

“Course, Ms. Wolfe.” Fletch offers the woman his elbow, noticing the baby following along behind them as well. “Can the lad have a biscuit?” Hearing Serena’s affirmative hum as he settles her in the hall, closing the door behind himself to leave Bernie alone with her daughter. “Are they going to be okay alone?” Fletch notices the infant doesn’t want to stray too far from his Nan and lifts him to sit in her lap, smirking a little when the boy instantly leans comfortably against her.

“I bloody well hope so.” Serena sighs, gently rubbing Cole’s back as she usually does with the tips of her fingers, “they’re both so stubborn, but I’ll be damned if this little one gets caught in the middle.”
Chapter 127

Chapter Summary

Bernie lays things out for her daughter.

Charlotte realizes just how serious things were while she was unconscious.

Bernie leans her back against the wall, arms folded over her chest as she watches her daughter. She doesn’t say anything, just looks at her.

Charlotte watches towards the end of the bed, knowing her mother’s tactics. She grew up with them, mostly. Char hates being watched for this very reason. At least, like this. Her eyes are glassy and she’s doing her very best just to calm herself down.

After maintaining silence for a few minutes, Bernie begins to speak, “Fifteen days ago, there was a terrorist attack at the Juniper Street shops, with the main target being the department store there. Their goal was to kill as many people as possible. It was at a magnitude that people haven’t seen in many years in this country.” She maintains a calm exterior, “You were on the topmost level of the department store during said attack, the third floor.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Char listens intently to her mother without making eye contact.

“There was a crowd that day at the shops, because of a tag sale or something of the like. I’m not entirely certain. Many of those people were in the lower levels.” She continues, “The attack was planned in excess, bombs pre-planted and...wires thread throughout. All expertly concealed...for the most part.” Bernie licks her lips, “I was here. Because of my presence, Holby was the designated trauma center for the attack.”

Charlotte remains unmoved, focusing on her breathing.

“People on the third level were among the last ones to be rescued.” Her voice softens for a moment. “Cameron was the receiving doctor when Serena was brought in via the ambulance.” Bernie falls silent for a moment, her eyes beginning to sting from the tears building within them, “She was so very pale. We managed a few words...and I made sure to tell her that I loved her because I...I didn’t know the extent of her injuries and they weren’t about to let me into theater.”
The younger woman’s chin begins to stiffen, never considering what her mother was going through during all of this. Knowing one has the ability and expertise to help a loved one, but ethically being unable to. Char lifts a hand, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her own ear. She continues to stare straight ahead.

“Then, Sasha brought in Cole. Obvious concussion with smoke inhalation, and he was still smiling.” Bernie leans her head back against the wall, amused by the happy infant, “we didn’t know the extent of his injuries at the time, but I quickly realized...you still weren’t out. I was the only one...the only one he knew that was able to comfort him and make decisions for his care.” She clears her throat, “it was...nearly two hours after that...when you were brought in. Your ribs were shattered, your lungs were punctured, your heart stopped and would not beat on its own.” She lifts a hand, wiping a tear that managed to escape the enclosure of her eyelid, “They declared you dead...and based on the extent of your injuries, you should be.”

Charlotte finally looks toward her mother, “that doesn’t explain why you refuse to let me see my file.”

“Because there is nothing in there that will make you feel better about what happened.” Bernie clears her throat, “the time of your death is written...and crossed out. The method in which they kept you alive is told in great detail within those pages.” She finally starts to near the bed, placing the blood pressure cuff onto her daughter’s arm, starting to take her levels. “Which is barbaric and amazing all at the same time.”

“Which would give me a better appreciation of the extent-”

“They don’t say how...deep your coma was. They don’t say how we all gathered here each day...with baited breath, hoping your heart wouldn’t stop again...and that you weren’t alone if it did. They don’t say how...” Bernie’s face tightens slightly, the tears unable to be hidden anymore, “how I tried to work out what to tell your son when he called for his Mum...and she wasn’t there anymore. Nor would she ever be coming back.” She sniffs, moving away from her daughter for a moment to cover her face with her hands in an attempt to calm the tears, but she knew that if she stopped now, she’d never be able to vocalize these things. She clears her throat, not caring about containing her emotions from her daughter anymore, “I started mourning for you...so that, if and when the day came, it wouldn’t hit me as hard as it did Serena when she lost Elinor.”

Charlotte reaches toward her mother after a moment, her own tears falling, “I’m sorry.” When Bernie takes her daughter’s hand after a moment, Char grips onto it, “I’m so sorry I put you through that.”

“No, there’s nothing for you to apologize for. I just need you to understand where I stand.” Bernie brings her free hand to caress her daughter’s cheek, leaning down to kiss her temple, knowing they both need this closeness when they’re each so uncomfortable with it usually. After a few slow, deep
breaths the tears subside quickly, “In fact,” She takes a seat on the bed, still holding her daughter’s hand, “there have been reports that a woman fitting your description had saved the lives of quite a few people before you were rescued in the aftermath of the attack.” Bernie raises her brow, “that’s why there’s a vigil at the gate. News outlets have gotten hold of the story...and people are proclaiming you a hero.”

“I don’t...” Char seems a bit confused by the information, “I don’t remember any of that.”

“Well...there’s more than one person saying the same information and giving personalized accounts. Then, an unknown source turned them onto your name and reporters were able to find photographs that I believe your brother had put online to one of his social media accounts. You haven’t any social media accounts and because of that, some people are even saying you don’t exist and these stories are all part of a mass hallucination...or you’re an actual angel.” Bernie tilts her head to the side, focusing on her daughter still, “I’ve been trying very hard not to march down there and tell them stories of your teenage years.”

Char begins to smirk before biting the corner of her lip, “don’t make me laugh. It hurts to laugh.”

Bernie reaches over, obtaining the other mask from the side table to cover the young woman’s nose and mouth as she notices the young woman continually struggling with her breathing. She doesn’t make a fuss of it, just does so casually. “Stop trying to push through the breathing. It isn’t doing you any favors. Your pulse ox is incredibly low and it’s a wonder you haven’t passed out.”

“I don’t want the tube again.” Charlotte answers from under the mask, needing to use her voice through the incessant hissing of the oxygen, which seems more prevalent with this type of mask than with the cannula.

“You don’t need the tube, just use this. I’d rather you use the mask than be hypoxic.” Bernie moves to stand, having been taking Char’s pulse as she held onto her as well as her respirations, “we’ll try the cannula later. You and I are fast healers, Char, but don’t push yourself too much.” She moves to the end of the bed, documenting her findings before tilting her head to the side, raising an eyebrow, “I only have one daughter and I’d like it if she listened to someone who has experience in trauma once in a while.”

Reaching up, Char moves the mask from her face for a moment, amused, “Why start now?” She grins a bit as she places the mask back onto her face.

Bernie chortles softly, “Let me open the door, Serena probably thinks we’re at one another's throats in here.”
“Just blubbering messes instead.” Charlotte watches her mother, moving the mask again as the woman turns toward the door, “Mum.” When Bernie pauses, she continues, “thank you for tending to Cole and...not abandoning me.”

Nodding, Bernie gives a quick glance over her shoulder, “Thank you for waking up.” She tugs open the door leading to the hall.
Chapter Summary

Evie Fletcher gets some help to see her Auntie Serena.

Serena realizes Bernie may be right to keep Charlotte from seeing the truth.

Chapter Notes

Double chapters today.

Few days after the last chapter.

Cameron sips from his paper cup of coffee within the canteen just inside the staff and ambulance entrance, clad in Keller berry scrubs and a heathered gray, zippered sweatshirt. He’s lost in his thoughts about how he’ll continue helping his mother tend the others in their family, though he didn’t inform her of such just yet.

“Excuse me.”

Lifting his head, Cam offers a young woman a smile. No older than a teenager, he’d guess. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Serena Campbell’s stepson?” The teen tilts her head to the side when he starts to look uneasy, continuing, “I’m not going to hound you or anything. My father is Adrian Fletcher.”

“Oh, you must be Evie. I’m Cameron Dunn. I’ve heard a lot about you.” Cam offers her his hand to shake, glad when she takes it, “Yes, yeah, that’s my Step mum.” He smirks ever so slightly, “Why do you ask?”

“I wanted to visit Auntie Serena while she was in hospital after my father told my siblings and I what happened. I didn’t think I actually knew anyone who was there...and I worried she was really...bad off.” She licks her lips, “I started seeing things about your sister in the news, you and Auntie Serena in photographs with her...and I realized just who she was as well.” Evie bites the corner of her lip, “do you think-”
“Would you like for me to take you to them? You could meet the illustrious Angel of the Third Floor.” He could tell where this conversation was going. “Serena and Mum are up there now with her. Kill two birds and all that.” Cam nods a little, “do you want a coffee or anything before we head up?” Seeing her subtle negative head shake, he leads her toward the elevators. “Why didn’t you just ask your Dad?”

“I did.” Evie nods, standing next to the handsome older man, “he told me Ms. Naylor would have his head if she saw me on the ward again.”

Cam huffs a soft sound of amusement, “Sounds about right. Why I float between Keller and AAU now...less stress.”

“You want to be a surgeon though, don’t you? Isn’t that a stressful position?”

He nods slowly, “of course, but a different kind of stress. Not interpersonal or emotional stress...even if it means working with my parents.” Cameron explains, then pauses, “You referred to Serena as your aunt?”

“Yeah.” Evie folds her arms over her chest, “Auntie Serena cared for my siblings and I a lot, she buys us Christmas gifts.” She bites the skin on her lip, continuing when they leave the elevator, “My mum died years ago and...Auntie Serena kind of...helped me with the things that Dad just couldn’t. Things fathers don’t consider for their daughters.” She smiles a little, not going into what those sorts of things are, especially not with Cameron Dunn, “I stayed with her a lot and I wanted to just...move in, but...” Evie shrugs, “obviously Dad wasn’t really okay with that.”

“That’s too bad. You probably would have fit right in.” Cam smirks leading her in the general direction of the room.

Fletch lifts his head as he stands at the nurses’ station when he sees Keller scrubs in the corner of his eye, “Evie?” He folds the file, rounding the desk. “Cam, I got it from-”

“She’s alright. I’m on an extended coffee break.” Cameron nods, placing an arm over the girl’s shoulders. Think of something quickly. “She’s going to watch over Cole while Mum takes Serena to her appointment in a couple days and we just...wanted him to get to know her first. That is, of course, if that’s okay with you.”
“Oh.” Fletch stands a bit straighter, “Yeah, yeah, sure. Could have kept an eye on him myself. Uncle Fletch to the rescue.” He wiggles his head from side to side, pretending to adjust his tie, earning an amused smirk from his daughter. “Lad followed me to the vending machines and back. We’re best mates now.”

“Did you buy him biscuits?” Evie offers, knowing her father all too well.

“Possibly.”

Cam nods, “bribe him with food and you’ll win his love every time.” He motions with a tilt of his head, “you all can talk a bit, if you don’t mind. I’ve used up quite a bit of that extended coffee break and I’d like to spend some of it with-”

“Oh, of course. Go on.” Fletch turns back to the nurses’ station as they walk away, going back to the folder he was reading previously. Why wouldn’t they mention this to me? He asks himself, not that it really matters. He shrugs, she’ll be fine with Serena.

“Why did you lie for me?” Evie asks quietly once she believes them to be out of earshot.

“Dads can be a pain in the neck. I speak from experience.” Cam nods, taking his arm from her shoulders. He pauses outside of the room, not hearing anything. He furrows his brow, pushing the door open a crack just to listen.

“Mum isn’t taking this very well and I don’t…” Char pauses, using her voice though it pains her to do so, “I don’t want to hurt her in the process, but I need to know more. I need information.”

“I’m on your side here, Charlotte.” Serena watches her stepdaughter. “Your mother disabled WiFi at the house. She’s hidden the power cord to the router. I had Jason pop over to...attempt to fix the situation.” She shakes her head a little, “I wouldn’t have known otherwise.”

“No WiFi?” Char raises her brow, “if she thinks for a moment-”

“Sorry to bother.” Cameron pushes the door open a bit more, “Serena, you’ve a visitor.” He’s actually kind of glad his mother isn’t in the room, “Where’s Mum?”
“Cole had an appointment on Otter.” Char mumbles, pulling the mask to cover her face again.

Serena lifts her head when she sees the young woman peeking into the room, a grin spreads across her face, “Evie.” The closeness she once had with the girl in the back of her head. When Elinor died, it gave her some solace to help with her. Though, it also played on her sense of guilt about the whole thing. When the young woman moves over to her, she wraps her arms around her, feeling a gentle yet tender embrace. “Visiting your father?”

“Visiting you.” Evie continues with their embrace. Serena actually means a great deal to her, always has. She finally breaks the embrace, standing up straighter. “Dad didn’t want me to bother you-”

“You could never bother me, Evie.” Serena shakes her head slowly before glancing to the rest of the room, “I see you’ve already met Cameron. The one in the bed is Charlotte.”

Evie lifts her head over, offering a smile and an outstretched hand as she nears the bed, “It’s...really an honor to meet you.”

“An honor?” Char smirks, taking hold of the young woman’s hand. “Why an honor?” She furrows her brow, reaching over to the bedside table, obtaining the nasal cannula attachment. Char begins to switch them, having done so many times by now. She’s slow, her hands tremble.

“Let me help you.” Evie nods, knowing the task isn’t a hard one. She’s curious as to why the young woman shakes so much, but doesn’t ask any questions, just doing it.

“Thank you.” Charlotte leans her head back, watching the teenager after, “you want to be a nurse like your Dad?”

“No, um...I want to be a surgeon.” She answers quietly, putting the face mask onto the bedside table. Evie folds her arms over her chest after. “Doesn’t matter.” She shakes her head, looking between the women. “I’ve been um...keeping up with what happened.” Evie glances to Serena, her eyes glassy, “When Dad told us, I...I thought you...”

“Come here.” Serena holds her arms out again, embracing the young woman again.

Charlotte glances to her brother, smirking toward him, “are you coming up after your shift?”
“Yeah. Need to speak with Mum anyway. You’re breaking out of here tomorrow, right?” Cam folds his arms, standing by the doorway still. Seeing his sister’s nod, he grins, “Getting excited?”

“We’ll talk later about it.” She doesn’t want to voice her concerns around Serena, knowing her brother might understand a bit better. Charlotte watches as he takes his leave, turning her attention back toward Evie Fletcher and Serena. “So, Evie...you mentioned that you’ve been following what happened...”

Evie hums an affirmation, breaking from the embrace again to pull over a chair between the women, “I’m usually home alone with my siblings, but...Dad’s been getting a bit better about that, even hired someone for me to have a bit of freedom.” She lifts a hand, tucking her hair behind her ear, “I’ve been...wanting to help somehow, but I didn’t know how to do that. So, I kept watching and researching different news broadcasts for some answers. I asked Dad, but he was...Dad and didn’t know anything.”

Serena smiles, amused, “I’d imagine no different.”

“Is that why you said it was an honor to meet me?” Charlotte sees the brunette’s nod, “Evie, would you happen to have your mobile on you?”

“I do, did you need to use it?” Evie unlocks her mobile, handing it to the other woman.

“Thank you.” Char swipes her finger over the screen, typing in the name of the incident. She starts to focus, hearing the subtle chatter between the others in the room. Security camera footage after the explosion, but not before. Whoever did this wanted people to see their handiwork and knew exactly what they were doing.

Surveying the room around her, Char saw the numerous people she helped, but didn’t think much of it all. They just needed help and she was able to give it. She could hardly breathe by now and it’s finally caught up with her, causing her to fall to the ground. She glanced toward the ceiling with the belief that this is how she was going to die, but at least she did something like helping others live in her final moments.

“They were all supposed to die. You included.” A body, clad entirely in black, loomed over her. Face covered. Large, heavy boots on their feet. No one could possibly describe a single thing about the figure. They made certain of that. Lifting the boot, the figure began to kick the side of Char’s chest. An outlet for their anger. Then again, and again. “And you’ve ruined it.” Finally, Charlotte
fell unconscious.

“Charlotte.” Serena is sitting at the edge of the bed now, carefully removing the mobile from the young woman’s hands to give back to Evie. She licks her lips, noticing the young woman’s far away stare as tears escape her stepdaughter’s eyes. “Charlotte, are you with us?”

Char meets the woman’s eye, finally snapping out of her flashback, “I couldn’t...there were so many I couldn’t save. So much screaming. So much noise. People burning alive. I couldn’t...lift or drag people very far. Hurt too much. I hurt so...so much.”

“Charlotte, you did incredibly well. Better than some professionals would have done when in that instance.” Serena lifts a hand to the young woman’s cheek, wiping away a fallen tear with her thumb. She licks her lips, focusing on the young woman, “There’s no way to save them all. There never is.”

“I should have...pushed through the pain more-”

“No.” Serena shakes her head negatively, “No, sweetheart, you did so much.”

Char’s leans her head into Serena’s hand, closing her eyes, whispering. “Not enough.”

Speaking after a moment, “Charlotte,” Serena meets her stepdaughter’s eyes. Maybe Bernie was right in shielding the girl. A call to Annette may do her some good. “People are safe because of you. I’m safe because of you.”
Chapter 129

Chapter Summary

Cam calls his mother out.
Bernie decides to accept her son's continued help.

Chapter Notes

Happens just after the last chapter.

I spent the past few days reading over your comments throughout the story and it's given me such inspiration to continue on when I was doubting myself. Thank you all so, so very much for all of it. <3

I do request a bit of help from you guys in the comments, I'm planning a time jump for these characters (focusing on Cole trying to figure his place in the world and the importance of his relationship with his grandparents). About 10 years down the line. Nothing you'll all see yet or for quite a while, if ever.

However, I can't decide if I want to do so as a new story or just tack it onto this one. I feel if I tack it onto this one, it may become a bit confusing for new readers while adding a bunch of unnecessary chapters to this when it's actually a new story. If I start it as a new story, it also might be confusing for new readers who never read the story before it, but it will show a definite separation in time. So....they kind of both have their positives and negatives.

Any help would be appreciated as you guys are the ones who read all of this. I'd like to do right by you all. Thank you in advance. <3

“So we’re doing Clingy Cole today, are we?” Bernie sighs, actually not minding that the infant is gripping onto her. She’s tired, mentally, and physically. Her daughter’s impending return home only causes her more frustration. She takes her time after leaving the pediatrician's office and furrows her brow when she sees her son sitting in the waiting room, “Cameron?”

“Hey.” Cam stands, offering a gentle smile. “Was waiting for you to finish up.”

“Yes, but why not just come to the room?” Bernie furrows her brow a little, noticing her grandson
rubbing his face against her. “I should have borrowed your baby carrier today. He doesn’t want to be put down at all.” She lifts a hand to rub the boy’s back, “which is the last thing I need when I must help Serena get around as well.”

“So, hear me out.” Cameron begins, strolling alongside his mother. “I was staying with you while Serena was still in hospital in order to help tend to Cole. Right?”

“Correct.”

“With Charlotte being released tomorrow, that’s kind of going to double...triple your workload, and I know she isn’t half as mobile as Serena is. Char’s going to be a challenge to take care of.”

“Would you please get to the point, Cameron?” Bernie glances to her grandson, who is pitifully pouting at this point. She lifts her wrist to check the timepiece, “that’s the problem. It’s time for your meds...and I reckon you may be in a bit of pain. Poor boy.” She mumbles to herself.

“Should you agree, I’ll keep staying with you.” Cam offers, “I can work night shifts between Keller and AAU, if you decide to take the day shifts. That way one of us can be around at all times.” He offers her a clever smile, “Ryan and Dad said they’d like to help as well.”

She looks over to her son, “why would you want to do all of that?”

“Because I love my family and I want to be there for them.” He thought the answer was obvious, he honestly was trying to help. Cameron knows he hasn’t been around nearly as much as he wanted to be, but what better time like the present to change things. “Do I need a reason?”

Bernie shakes her head a little, “No, I suppose not.” She places her free hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “It should be interesting, though. We haven’t all lived under the same roof since you and your sister were teenagers.”

“And I’m sure that’s a time you want to go back to.” Cam teases, knowing full well how often he’d get in trouble by his parents, especially his mother, who only expected him to give his best and nothing less.

“Time of my life.” Bernie huffs a soft chortle, “I assume you’ve both...grown up and grown out of those behaviors.”
“Well, I hope so.” He nods, “I mean, my sister is a model citizen and far more medically inclined than myself without seeing a single day of medical school. I’m holding down a job and would rather be with you lot than volunteering with medical aid in Jamaica...surprisingly.” Cameron smirks, amused, “I think you and Dad did an okay job with us.”

She rolls her eyes, amused by her son. “Glad to hear it.”

Cameron remains quiet for a moment as they step onto the elevator, “I overheard Char and Serena talking to one another. It was a...conversation I don’t believe they thought anyone else could hear.”

He watches the numbers as they change floors, “Is it true that you disabled the WiFi at the house?”

Bernie didn’t think Serena would notice that. They were mostly watching Netflix, but she was able to hardwire the television to enable them to do that without any issues. Her wife hadn’t wanted to use her mobile, the family already around them, there weren’t many others left to phone.

He can see it in her face, she was great at poker, but he could always see through her. “Mum, why?”

“The less they see about this, the better. Once everything calms a bit, I’ll-”

“Calm a bit?” Cameron shakes his head, “Mum, this was one of the largest, homegrown attacks in over a decade...in the whole country. Things aren’t going to calm down for years to come. It’s better they see the information about it all at home, rather than have a...possible freak out while in public. Wouldn’t you say?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Bernie answers quietly.

“Because seeing all that happened and being affected by it...isn’t about them. It’s you.” Cameron is tempted to stop the elevator just to enable him to speak with his mother without her being able to run away. He does the same thing, but at least he admits it. “You want to protect them. I understand that-”

“You really don’t.” Her voice raises ever so slightly, signifying that she wants to end the conversation.
Cam continues on with his train of thought, “It’s making you think about when you served in the military. I’ve seen how you are with something as simple as fireworks, and I’ve seen Char do it with something as simple as a bottle against the bar at Albie’s. It isn’t something to be ashamed of.”

“This really isn’t any of your business, Cameron.” Bernie mumbles, glad when the doors open to finally be rid of the enclosed space. She turns abruptly, meeting her son’s eyes, “What I saw then has no bearing on my actions now.”

He stares at the eyes he shares for a moment, “Okay.” Cameron knows he isn’t going to get anywhere with this, especially not with her. His gut tells him that he’s right, but he won’t carry on with his mother. “Evie Fletcher is visiting with them, currently. She seems sweet.”

“She and Serena have always been close.” Bernie replies quietly, glancing away without moving. “By the by, Cameron, I think continuing your stay would be in everyone’s best interest. We’ll work out the logistics later.” She offers him a nod, continuing on her way toward her daughter’s room.

Cameron stands there a moment, watching as is mother steps out of sight. He glances to his watch before pushing the button on the elevator again. Tomorrow is set to be very interesting.
Chapter 130

Chapter Summary

Cameron tries to fix an issue, only to be told not to by Serena.

Bernie finally brings Charlotte home.

Chapter Notes

130 chapters. Blimey.

Bit of darkness and then some humor with this one. I do miss the humor.

Also, special thanks to everyone who offered a bit of help in the comments last chapter.
It really did help me decide what I'm going to do and I appreciate it so very much. <3

“Upon speaking with Jason about what was needed, I come bearing gifts.” Cameron holds up a yellow Ethernet cable, smiling toward his stepmother as she sits at the breakfast table in the kitchen, sipping a cup of coffee. “Char will go mad without WiFi...I mean...who wouldn’t?”

Serena straightens her back a bit, looking toward her stepson, “No.” Her hand wrapped around the mug, “You don’t need to do that.” She absently brings her free hand up, running her nails over the hair on her temple.

“Oh, it’s fine. I don’t mind-”

“I’m sorry.” She shakes her head, “what I mean to say is that I don’t want you to do that.” When he nears her, giving a confused expression, Serena continues, “your mother was right...as she often is. We need to...shield these things from Charlotte for as long as we possibly can. Risking any further damage to her mental well being would be-”

Cameron rolls his eyes, “She’s an adult, Serena.”

“Yes, she is.”
“Yet, you want to shield her like a child.”

“Because she remembers.” Serena replies honestly, her voice quiet. “You didn’t see the absolute...terror in her eyes, Cameron. You didn’t hold her trembling hand.” She lifts her head, finally looking to her stepson, “and that was just from looking at photographs, not even the security camera footage. That’s what news broadcasts are...streaming at all hours of the day and night without any consideration to the victims.”

Cameron sighs, tossing the cord onto the table as he sits across from her, “You’re a victim too.”

“I was unconscious for the most part. I-I-I didn’t experience the same things she did.” Serena stutters slightly, something she only really does when she’s nervous, though she doesn’t have any reason to be at the moment. “I would prefer not to talk about it if it’s all the same.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you to.” He sighs, “I just...I’ve never been through an ordeal like you all were, and I hope I never am, but I still...want to understand it. I think I’d be able to help more if I know what the two of you...experienced.” Cam bites his lip for a moment, “You know, in one of the videos...I was almost certain I saw you, but I didn’t want to ask Mum. I knew she wouldn’t be very happy about it.”

“Probably not.” Serena smiles a little, lifting her head when she hears as Cole begins to cry from his cot on the upper level. “Care to fetch him for me?” She watches as her stepson walks briskly toward the doorway. Serena takes the moment of being alone to inhale and exhale slowly, she’s had nightmares about the whole ordeal, but nothing in her day to day life thus far. Serena stands slowly, using her cane as to move toward the lounge. Her mug of coffee in her other hand. Noticing movement outside, she pauses near the window to peer out.

“Charlotte, just take your time. We’re aren’t in a race.” Bernie calls out to her daughter, only just having stopped the car and the young woman is already attempting to climb out. “The slower the better.” She exits the driver’s side, rushing around to her daughter to help.

“I refuse to...allow my body to dictate my abilities.” Charlotte grits her teeth as she tries to stand, using the car as leverage. Small bag looped around her shoulder, supplying her with oxygen via a cannula at her nose. Her voice remains slightly lower than it was before the attack, as it’s remained since she woken, “I refuse...to be a burden.” After a moment, she’s able to stand, “I refuse...to make you do too much for me.”

Bernie rolls her eyes, standing in front of her daughter as she listens to her, sunglasses covering her face, “Are you quite finished?”
Char looks to her mother, her own eyes covered with sunglasses as well. Tight fitting jeans and an oversized dress shirt cover her frame, black plimsolls so she doesn’t slip while walking. She looks a great deal like her mother at this moment, with exception to the oxygen tube at her nose and her long hair. Her mouth turning up in a smirk, “and if I’m not?”

She gives her daughter an amused look, opening the back door, obtaining the cane her daughter was told to use. “Do you want me to hold onto your other side, or-”

“I’m going to see if Serena wants to have a cane fight.” Char’s tone playful, anything to make the moment light for herself and keep herself from thinking about her ordeal. She ignores her mother, set on doing things herself, “I didn’t hurt my legs, I hurt my lungs.”

Bernie lets her daughter ramble on, “You should be using a walker-”

“Which I refused.”

“I just don’t understand why you refused it.” Bernie shakes her head, walking toward the house, but staying close to her daughter, glancing back every few seconds. “It would enable you more freedom about the house and we wouldn’t worry as much.”

“And I’ll become dependant on it.” Char takes her time, pausing every few steps to catch her breath, “I was pregnant a couple weeks ago, young, and active...now I feel like a pensioner.” She raises an eyebrow, “what a lucky guy Ryan is to have such a cool, rapidly aging girlfriend.” She starts to move again, “and Cole with his proper awesome old Mum.”

“Stop.” Bernie draws out, doing her best not to laugh at her daughter’s behavior, “if you focused more on your steps than your jokes, we’d be in the house already.” She turns her head when she hears the entry door open, smirking toward her wife. “Are you sure you want her back?”

“Too late to return her to hospital now. It will take her hours to get back in the car.” Serena smiles, watching her stepdaughter take her time. Reaching the door after another minute, Serena wraps an arm around the younger woman, embracing her tenderly, “Welcome home, Charlotte.” It was something she wasn’t so sure she would be able to ever say. She closes her eyes for a moment, just holding the girl.

“Perfect timing.” Cam sees his sister and stepmother in the doorway, his nephew in his arm. “Mum,
did you have the larger oxygen tank in the boot?” He calls out, trying to ignore Cole’s raspy chant of *Ma* as he claps his hands. “You see your Mum, bud?”

“Nope, he always chants that.” Charlotte teases before she tries to take a deep breath, but knows she’s unable to. When her stepmother steps aside to let her into the house, “Let me sit first, Cole.”

Cameron lets his nephew down, watching as the boy excitedly runs circles around Charlotte, happy to finally have her back in his space. He walks past the group of women, obtaining the larger tank of oxygen from the boot of his mother’s car. “Do they know you’re...borrowing this?”

Bernie gives her son an unamused look, “Just take it to Char’s room, please.” She sighs, pushing a hand through her hair. Bernie takes hold of her wife’s hand as they stand in the foyer, “I had a feeling that this was going to be like when they were teenagers.”

“Oh, I reckon we’ll be fine. We’re all competent adults.” Serena can’t keep a genuine smile from her face, “It was amusing with just one extra you in the house with Charlotte, now we have two extra you in the house with Cameron added to the mix and...”

“They’re going to drive me mad...also like when they were teenagers,” Bernie smirks a little, amused by her partner, “and you’re loving every moment of this.”

“Oh...absolutely.” Serena draws out, “I’m having the time of my life.” Her grin grows, giving a squeeze to her wife’s hand before moving toward her original destination of the lounge, watching Cole eagerly cuddle with his mother. They should be just fine.
Chapter 131

Chapter Summary

Cameron lays down some hard truths.
Charlotte has a moment of weakness.

Chapter Notes

You'll see I've set an ending point to this story, which I think you'll all enjoy. Bit of a surprise and a small jump for the last chapter.

However, it also opens up the next story in this series. I don't know how long that story will go, but we'll see when we get there. Hopefully as long as this one. We can always do some time jumping though.

"Please, just let me help you." Cameron stands near his sister, in the kitchen. "That's what I'm here for, Char. To help you and Stepmum." The younger woman is attempting to hide her gasps as she stands at the kitchen counter, trying to put together a simple sandwich.

"Leave me...alone." Charlotte shakes her head, her hands trembling ever so slightly. Her cane resting against the cupboard next to her, "I just need...I'm almost finished." She glides the knife of mayonnaise over the toasted wheat grain bread. She pauses, setting the knife down for a moment and making a fist in an effort to calm her movements.
Cam sighs softly, picking up a stool from the other side of the kitchen island, “At least sit while-” He stops when she turns abruptly, the knife back in her hand with an angry expression on her face, “are you going to stab me?” He starts to chuckle to himself softly, “you can’t even stand on your own properly and-”

“Shut up.” Char nearly growls, her vocal cords still healing from their smoke burn.

“-you’re threatening me. I’ve done nothing except help you, Char.” Cameron shakes his head, his voice raising a bit. “Look at you. You should be sitting down.”

“Don’t tell me...what I should be doing.” She weakly throws the knife at her brother, though narrowly missing his abdomen before picking up her cane and holding it as a baseball bat in a type of self defense from him. Not that Charlotte feels she necessarily needs it. “Stay away from me.” Her voice shakes a bit, “I don’t need...I don’t need...your help.”

“You are out of control.” Cameron shakes his head, “No one can say anything to you. Go ahead and hit me. Go ahead, Charlotte.”

“Okay.” Serena’s voice booms from behind the doorway of the kitchen. “Cameron, that’s enough.”

“She’s going to faint, Serena. She’s going to fall out making a sandwich.” Cameron shakes his head, moving away from his sister, “and she throws a knife at me because she doesn’t want to hear it.” He laughs a little to himself, “I’m not afraid of her like you and Mum are. Two of you walk around on eggshells. I won’t do that, I’m sorry.”

“While your benevolence is touching, I said that is enough.” Serena says again, watching the young woman grip onto the counter. She moves closer, only to have Char point her cane toward her. “Okay.” She maintains an even tone, maintaining her distance, “would you like for me to get your oxygen?” When the young woman shakes her head negatively, Serena continues, “I can hear you’re having a difficult time. You have reduced lung function.”

“Don’t...want that.” Char keeps her cane pointed toward them, a tear escaping her eye.

“No one is making you stop doing what you’re doing.”

“Did you hear the part where I said she threw a knife at me, Serena? What was it Mum would say,
Char? There are consequences to actions and when you know you did something wrong, you must own up to your own misdeeds.” Cameron suddenly pulls the cane from the young woman’s hand, causing her to fall onto the kitchen floor. “Do you remember that?” He pauses, realizing his anger is getting the better of him, “Char.”

“Cameron!” Serena shouts at him, holding a hand toward the young man as she kneels next to her stepdaughter, “go and get her oxygen.” She tries to help Charlotte up, only to have the young woman shy away from her. “Let us help you, please.”

“My problem.” Char coughs, pushing herself to sit up a bit while on the tiled floor, “Not yours.” Her breathing grows more labored as she lifts her gaze to meet that of Serena’s. “I need...to be...better.”

“That won’t happen unless you’re proactive.” Serena takes the oxygen tube when it’s offered to her, gently placing it onto Charlotte’s face and tucking it behind her ears, “which I know you can be.”

“I just...want to be alone.” Charlotte shakes her head, starting to breathe a little easier with the oxygen now on her face. She pauses, noticing her son toddle up behind Serena, taking hold of his grandmother’s arm. “Take him with you. He doesn’t ever want me. He’s yours anyway.”

“Oh, don’t start that.” Serena shakes her head negatively, “you know that isn’t true.”

“Char, come on. Let me help you up.” Cameron outstretches his hand down toward his sister. “We’re over it...and you have a sandwich to finish.” He doesn’t move, “once you get up, we’ll leave you alone to make it...and we’ll head to the lounge. Okay?” He helps her stand when she takes his hand, knowing it would be a bit more complicated than just yanking her up. He uses both hands, doing his best to remain neutral. “Okay.” He picks up her cane not far from them, handing it to his sister, “Make your sandwich, Char. You’ll need a different knife.”

Serena accepts an offered hand from her stepson as well, her jaw tightening with emotion at the pain her stepdaughter is going through. Watching as Cameron lifts Cole from the floor as she gives Charlotte a final glance. Serena steps away from the room, moving toward the lounge. “I don’t like this.” She whispers, carefully lowering herself onto the sofa.

“No one likes it, Stepmum.” Cameron looks to his nephew in his arm, placing him onto the sofa as well, watching as the boy cuddles up to his grandmother again. “You and Mum just...need to be honest with her. No kid gloves anymore. That’s the whole...that’s the whole problem.”
“She’s...in pain, Cameron. Her emotions are raw and-”

“Refusing to speak to Ryan. He asked me in the coffee shop if there was anything we needed because she refuses his calls.” Cam explains, sitting on the other end of the sofa, “if we wanted him to take Cole to his GP follow up appointment, if we needed for him to take you or Char to other appointments, absolutely anything.” Cameron shrugs, “I get that she’s hurting. I do, but...we didn’t do anything. You and I, Mum...Ryan and Cole. We aren’t the ones she should be...lash out at.”

“I don’t think she can control it.” Serena answers quietly, swallowing. If it weren’t for Cole’s face in the crook of her neck, she’d probably be even more emotional. Her nails absently glide up and down the boy’s back, “that’s the bad part.”

“Control what? Her anger?”

“Any of it.” Serena just stares forward.

Cameron reaches into his pocket, sighing softly as he pulls out his mobile. Using it just as a distraction really. “I thought...she was getting back to how she was. This isn’t my sister.” His own feelings softening as he continues to focus on his mobile, hiding his damp eyes, “I don’t even recognize this person.”

“She’s been through quite an ordeal-”

“So have you and Cole...and still she yells at you.” Cam turns his attention toward the older woman, “that isn’t fair. You deserve to be treated better.” He glances to his nephew as the boy is gently kneading his Nan’s other shoulder, “So does Mum...and pushing Cole away like Char does...” Cam shakes his head, “he just wants his Mum, but she won’t let him.”

“She lets him.” Serena feels protective of the young woman, more so now more than before, “just not while your mother or I are around. I watch her sometimes when she thinks we aren’t near. She’s just-” She pauses when she hears a dish drop in the kitchen.

Cameron stands, taking a moment to look at the woman on the sofa, “You deserve better, Serena.” He nods, finally moving away from the room, leaving Serena alone with her thoughts and grandson, holding onto one another. Upon entering the kitchen, he sees his sister back on the floor, trying to clean up the mess she has accidentally made with the contents of her dropped dish. Cam does it for her, watching as she just sits there, feeling useless. Without saying anything, he finishes cleaning up
everything. Cameron kneels on the floor, carefully wrapping his arms around his sister, letting her press her face against his chest, sobbing. He doesn’t know if he should say anything, doesn’t know if he possibly could.
Chapter 132

Chapter Summary

Serena leaves Charlotte in Evie’s care.

Evie helps Charlotte realizes a few things.

She’s sweating, looking above she realizes the sprinklers aren’t going to come on. Not really. A couple drips, but nothing sprays. Not like they should. Screaming, people are being burned. She can smell it, and it makes her sick to her stomach.

“My leg, my bloody leg.” An older man groans loudly.

Hearing the voice, she follows it, hardly able to see with all the smoke and pyrotechnics. “Let me see.”

The man gives her a look, “You a doctor?”

“Does it matter? I can help you if you let me.” Luckily he’s wearing short trousers. She looks down, seeing the definite fracture and the bone having broken the skin, “Looks worse than it is.” She glances around, grabbing one of the shirts off the clothing carousel, “it’s bleeding too much, but keeping it stable is most important. Called a compound fracture.” Her breathing labored as she grabs onto his lower leg, ready to pull it into place better, “This is going to hurt...a lot.”

“Charlotte.” Serena stands at the foot of the bed, noticing the young woman staring straight ahead. Unblinking, unmoving. She’d been watching for quite a while now, her stepdaughter never realizing she was being watched. It actually frightened her a bit. “Are you okay?”

It takes Charlotte a moment to realize just where she is. “I was...I was asleep.”

“With your eyes open?” She isn’t expecting a response from her stepdaughter. “No matter, are you going to be okay today? With the three of us at the hospital, Evie is here to keep you company.” Serena explains, “help you with Cole and-”
“Babysit me.” Char mumbles.

Serena gives her a knowing scowl, “Andrea is doing a home visit for you today as well.” She licks her lips, noticing the young woman still appearing a bit out of sorts, “I can push back my return if you’d rather I stay home with you. It isn’t any trouble.”

“I’m sure they’ve been eagerly awaiting your return, Serena.” She does her best to offer a reassuring smirk. “Don’t you worry about me when there’s plenty of F1s waiting for you to shout at them.” Char blinks slowly, “I’m probably just...going to stay in bed today. I’m not feeling so hot.” She’s gotten used to the nasal cannula tucked under her nose and behind her ears, “Is Cole asleep?”

“No, Evie is getting him settled with breakfast. I have reduced hours for my initial return, so I’ll only be working until dinnertime at the latest.”

“I think I may try to cook tonight.” Char licks her lips, “I haven’t since I’ve come home from hospital, but...I want to. I think it will help me relax or whatever. Get my mind off of things.”

“As long as you let Evie help you, I don’t see why it should be an issue.” Serena gives her a nod, still watching the young woman for a moment after, “Charlotte, if you need any one of us to come home, please don’t hesitate to phone. We will return as soon as humanly possible.” She sighs, “Oh, who am I kidding, I know you won’t.”

Char taps the side of her nose, indicating the woman is correct in assuming. “So, what is it you want? Pasta, chicken, steak?”

“Surprise me?” Serena offers the young woman a wink before taking her exit from the room. She descends the stairs, making a turn to go to the kitchen. “Evie, you have my mobile number on you, correct?”

“Of course.” Evie nods, taking a look at the woman’s face, “You look worried.”

Serena gives her best lighthearted shrug, “No more than I usually am.” She moves closer to her grandson, “Now, just remember, he’s going to try to roughhouse a bit, but don’t let him. His concussion is still healing.” She sighs, leaning down to kiss the baby’s hair, “and if either of them start to act a bit...off, immediately phone me. Understand?”
“I...have only started to learn how Charlotte reacts, what if-”

“You’ll know when you see it.” Serena nods, moving to the foyer to obtain her overcoat.

Evie waits until the woman leaves and Cole finishes his pieces of scrambled eggs. She cleans the boy’s face and hands, “Shall we go see Mummy?” Lifting him from his highchair, she moves to the foyer and begins to climb the stairs, hearing a loud yell from within the young woman’s room. Honestly, Evie’s almost afraid to enter. She takes a deep breath, biting her lip before pushing the door open a sliver.

Charlotte aggressively pulls photographs and paintings from the wall, ripping her bedspread off of her bed, even throwing the lamp on her bedside table against the wall. After finishing abruptly, she slowly sinks to her knees, the mess surrounding her. She leans back on her heels, finally letting out a guttural yell toward the ceiling before breaking down into a sob.

Evie closes her eyes for a moment, almost able to feel the older woman’s anguish. She lets Cole onto the floor, the boy pushing open the door to go to his mother. Better treat this gingerly, “You don’t need to do that.” Char places an absent hand to her side, doing her best to calm her own tears. When Cole reaches her, she wraps her arms around him, offering a subtle smile when the boy tries to wipe the tears falling next to her nose. “My sweet boy.” She whispers, looking to his face. His bruising having turned into a yellowish color. Shouldn’t be terribly long now before it’s completely gone.

“Well, I’m going to anyway.” Evie smiles a little as she collects the picture frames, looking to each photograph within them. “Is this you when you were younger?” She offers it to the other woman, hoping Char elaborates and gets her head off of whatever it was caught on.

Charlotte takes the frame from her, smirking slightly, “I was about...three or four. It was Halloween and...all I wanted to be was a Cadbury egg.” She gives it back, continuing, “Dad said it was ridiculous since it wasn’t even close to Easter. Tried to get me to be absolutely anything else. Doctor, princess, footballer, whatever he could think of. Mum wouldn’t have any of it, said I had already chosen and that she would try her hardest since she was home, and able to. That’s what she came up with.”

Evie waves a frame in the air a tad, “Ryan in the wading pool? He’s well fit.”
She starts to grin, “I mentioned that Cole didn’t have one and it showed on my doorstep the very next day.” Charlotte watches as the young woman hangs it on the wall, “that and a bunch of little rubber ducks.”

Evie smirks, lifting another, the wall was filled with them previously. Different frames in different styles. “Serena with Cole and Guinevere...reading a book...”

“Trying to read a book. Gwen isn’t terribly...willing to sit still for long. Neither is Cole anymore.” He is now though, leaning against his mother as he sits on the floor with her. Charlotte smiles at the thought, “Serena loves every second of the attention...though I doubt she’d admit that.”

“I’ve seen how she is with Cole more than I have Guinevere. He has her wrapped around his finger.” Evie hums a chuckle, “doesn’t help that he follows her all about the house either.” She puts up another, “he does it with your Mum too.”

“But never me.”

Evie turns, glancing down to the young woman, “that’s not true.” She shakes her head, motioning to the boy with a nod of her head, “I don’t think he’s very sure about the oxygen yet. At least, he doesn’t seem to be.” She shakes her head, “Speaking of which, you should probably put that back on. I can hear you trying to breathe.”

Char licks her lips, “it’s been weeks. I hate it.”

“Well, while that’s technically true, you were also unconscious for a couple of them and didn’t really know what was going on anyway.” Evie points out, setting down a few of the frames in her hands, “Let me make your bed so that you can have a better place to sit.”

“I just want a fag and a cup of coffee, and not worry about being blown up...again.” Char smirks a little, aware that the teenager was doing as she said she would, “It’s the weekend, Evie. You’re supposed to be out with friends and...enjoying life. Why are you here?”

Evie doesn’t answer her at first, finishing what she was doing before moving around to stand in front of her, “I find you interesting.”
Charlotte furrows her brow, confused, “What?”

“You’re...a part of history. Like, a living, breathing part of history that’s not really that much older than I am. People are going to hear about you for years, decades to come. Yet...you don’t want to talk about it to anyone.” Evie shakes her head, “I watched a news segment the other day that spoke to someone you went to primary school with and they acted like it was the biggest story, like it was the closest thing to talking to you...bloody primary school.” A slight laugh to her voice, she takes a moment before continuing, “The public craves to hear from you...money aside, which I know you don’t care about in the slightest.” She pauses, holding out her hands to help the woman get up from the floor, “You gave people hope, Charlotte...” Evie meets the other woman’s eyes, “and all they want to do is thank you.”
Chapter 133

Chapter Summary

Serena receives an unexpected visitor on her first day back to work.
Ric listens to his friend’s worries.

Chapter Notes

Same day as last chapter.
Double chapter today, because why not?

“Nearly finished here.” Serena ties the suture closed, “can you understand why wearing your bicycle helmet is so important?” Seeing her young patient offer up a sad smirk, she continues, tying her last suture, “Okay, very good. Donna, if you could finish cleaning that up.” She noticed the nurse nearing her from her peripheral vision.

“Of course, Mrs. Wolfe. There’s also someone to speak with you. He’s waiting in your office.” Donna tells her quietly, offering a smile toward the child resting on the bed, ready to have his arm cleaned up.

Curling her lip playfully as she removes her gloves, tossing them in the bin. She takes a few pumps of hand sanitizer before moving away from the bed. Serena, on her first day back, was actually having a pretty decent day. Entering her office, she sees a pudgy man sitting on the sofa, cane in his hand, “Yes, hello. I’m Serena Wolfe.” She offers her hand toward the man, noticing his leg has a brace on it as well.

The man does his best to stand, always the gentleman, “Ron...Ron Paulus.”

“Oh, please, you’re injured. No need to rise on my account.” Serena motions for him to return to his chair, sitting across from him in her own desk chair, “So, Mr. Paulus, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Uh, well...I don’t want you kicking me out, see.” He seems worried all of a sudden.
Serena shakes her head a little, “I’m sorry, I don’t-”

“There was a bunch of us who...” Ron pauses, offering her the sparkling binder that was next to him, “We was all on the third floor during the Juniper Street attacks.” The man pauses, “I’ve been trying to make an appointment with you, but reception kept shutting me down. Acting like...I was some reporter or somethin’. I ain’t the sort.”

She was hoping no one would bring it up again, her eyes falling to the binder the man is offering. “What’s this?”

“I don’t know if she’s alive, I don’t know if she’s dead. I’ve been...searching for whatever I could about the angel.” He shakes his head, his eyes glassy, “then the news reported her name. Saying there was some source in the hospital that said she wasn’t a patient any longer.” Ron pauses, thinking of his wording, “I saw the pictures on telly of...” His voice breaks a bit, “and you was in them too.” The man finally meets the woman’s eyes, “You were there that day, I remember.”

Serena carefully takes the binder, “Still doesn’t answer what-”

“I guess she was your daughter, right? She called you her Mum and I saw the pictures on telly.” Ron repeats, motioning to the book with a nod of his head, “in there is a collection of notes and pictures, a scrapbook if you will, of all the things we wanted her to know. How thankful we are.”

She can feel the tears begin to flood her eyes, “Stepdaughter.”

Ron nods a little, “Nineteen people in total, not including you...or myself. Just the ones on social media. We have a group where...we help one another work through the things we saw and experienced.” He adjusts his position, his leg sore. “That book was made by a nine-year-old who was visiting her grandparents at the time. She and her grandfather were safe, but her grandmother died from a beam that had fallen from the ceiling...never had a chance. Maisy Cunningham was one of eight children saved on the third floor by the angel, including your grandson.”

“Why do you know-”

“I researched, Mrs. Wolfe.” Ron explains, “I don’t mean nothing by it. I just needed to know the angel was okay, which I assume she is or I doubt you’d be back so soon.”
Serena nods a little, “I understand, Mr. Paulus. She’s...doing okay and I suppose losing consciousness was my saving grace.” She huffs a soft sound of amusement, placing the book onto her desk. “Was there anything else I could-”

“Just...we may owe our lives to the angel, but...nineteen people in a forty-five minute, give or take, span...while she could hardly breathe herself.” Ron carefully stands, using his cane for support and stability, “there had to be some divine intervention that day and they were acting through your dau-” He pauses, “Stepdaughter.” Watching the woman for a moment, “don’t discount where you stand with her either. It may have been hectic at the time, but I heard her call you Mum.”

She continues to sit there, watching as the man limps away. Turning slowly to face her desk more, Serena considers the book. An artist rendition of Charlotte as an angel on the cover with the rest covered in golden sparkle. It causes her to smirk to herself.

Ric swings into the office, closing the door behind himself after a particularly stressful time in theater. “If I hear one more quip about my age from Xavier Duval-” He says aloud, enough for the room to hear, but nothing beyond it. He notices his friend sitting there, with that look on her face, and just staring at a closed book. “What have you there?”

Serena takes as deep a breath as she can muster and exhales before she begins to explain “Well,” She clears her throat, offering him the scrapbook binder, “I think Charlotte’s on her way to becoming a living saint.”

Raising an interested, yet amused, eyebrow, Ric takes the book from the older woman. Carefully opening it, he sees handwritten letters and photographs of families, ones that are drawn by children, ones that are very artistically done. “Oh, look, here you are.” He taps a page of the book, but notices she can’t bring herself to see what he’s referring to, “Serena.”

She shakes her head, “No, it’s not for me.” Serena swallows, lazily glancing over toward the man. “I don’t know whether or not I should take that to Charlotte.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“She’s...” Serena clears her throat, leaning back in her chair a bit, “having night terrors over what happened. The boyfriend hasn’t been by since she arrived home, though I believe he’s tried to phone her, she just isn’t answering. Bernie and I...take turns with her. It’s all we can do.” The silver haired woman falls quiet before speaking again, “It’s like when she first moved in, or worse...and I don’t
“You don’t know that she won’t either.” Ric shakes his head, closing the book, this was far too personal for him at the moment. “All of this is still fresh in her mind, Serena. I doubt if she’s even remotely dealt with the previous abuse. It’s many things all at one time.” He glances over, meeting his friend’s eye, “Just...remain honest with her. No one likes to have things hidden from themselves...even if it’s done without malice and in their best interest.”

She knows he’s right. However, her sense of protecting her stepdaughter far overshadows her desire for anything else. Serena exhales slowly, “It isn’t only Charlotte that I’m worried about through all of this.” She stands, taking a moment before sweeping out of the room.
Ryan arrives when his fiance refuses to speak to him.

Serena informs her wife of Annette's findings on Charlotte.

After revealing her familiarity to her daughter's situation, Bernie feels she may be the only one to understand.

Bernie moves to the entrance door when she hears the knock, turning the doorknob and tugging it open. She isn’t surprised to see the young man standing there, but doubts her daughter called him to visit, “Mr. Anand, good to see you.” She steps to the side, letting the man into the house.

“Your daughter kind of sucks at communication.” Ryan isn’t upset, not really, just already knowing and understanding what the young woman is like. He sighs, “I’ll go speak to her in a bit if it’s okay.” He crouches when Cole runs up to hold onto his leg, lifting the boy into his arms.

Smirking to herself, already knowing that she’s exactly the same way and her daughter gets it honesty. Bernie nods a little toward the man, “Serena’s upstairs with her now. She met with Annette Vickers today.”

“How did it go?”

Bernie shrugs a little, “Char hasn’t been...responding well to being home.” She keeps her voice soft, “I don’t want to sugar coat anything for you, Ryan, it isn’t my way.” The blonde leads him to the kitchen area where she had been boiling water in a kettle, “Tea?”

Ryan nods absently, the babe trying to talk to him with his raspy babbles. Ryan does his best to seem interested with various facial expressions, but continues to talk to Bernie through it. “What do you mean by that?” He pauses, “That Char isn’t responding...”
She tries to find the words, ones that won’t hurt her as well. “The PTSD she’s already had, but it’s just...intensified.” Bernie continues to face the kettle, knowing this is hitting a bit too close to home for her as well. “She’s working through it with her therapist, but...I want you to be prepared.” Turning after pouring the kettle water into a teapot with a mesh ball of loose leaf tea, “The first time I went overseas, I didn’t understand just how affected I would be by the things I saw.”

Watching her closely, Ryan slowly makes his tea with one hand. She’s never spoken to him about her time overseas, not her time married to Marcus Dunn. At least, not that he remembers. “Understandable.”

“Marcus thought...I’d just come home and be prepared to tend to Cameron and...” Bernie shakes her head a little, “that just isn’t how it worked.” She gives a sad smile, “Not that I didn’t try, but traumatic stress is...life changing...world shattering.”

“We’re only just starting to build our world together, Char and I.” Ryan accepts a slobbery kiss to his cheek from Cole before letting the boy down, watching as he rounds the kitchen island to beg his Gran for pieces of fruit, without actually able to say the words. “I’ll help her through anything she could possibly need help with.”

“It may not be quite so simple.” She responds quietly, obtaining the stored frozen melon from the freezer to give it to him in his netted pouch teether, something he requested often and it was like second nature by now to prepare it. Though his teeth are coming in just fine, it was just easier to give in to the boy this way, keeping him from choking on any larger fruit pieces.

“Showing her love and support isn’t simple?” Ryan raises an eyebrow, not really understanding. “It’s incredibly simple to me.”

“She may lash out at you, start arguments, destroy things, run...” Bernie watches him, “I want you to understand that, the way she acts currently, is not her speaking...it’s her trauma.” She doesn’t meet his eyes though, glancing down to her grandson who has decided to sit at her feet to enjoy his cold treat.

Nodding a little, he swallows, “When I asked her to marry me, I meant that I was promising to stand by her through the thick and thin. Better or worse. I don’t need the actual ceremony to prove that.” His voice is quiet, but not whispering. “My mother wasn’t too keen on her when I initially introduced Char. My father loved her, but my mother...she’s a tough nut to crack as it is.” Ryan smirks, amused by the memory. “When I phoned to tell them what happened, my mother sobbed. Kept saying, she’ll never be the same. At the time, It didn’t really register. I was...a bit out of sorts myself. You and I both were...if I remember correctly.”
“Now you’re realizing how right she was.” Bernie finishes the young man’s thought. “I wish nothing, but the best for you both. I do, Ryan, but I also don’t want to see you hurt in the process.” She pauses, “You’re a good guy, great father figure to Cole…”

“I don’t expect her to run to the Army and admit she’s a lesbian after being with me for twenty-five years, if that’s what you’re getting at.” Ryan points out, earning a gentle chuckle from the woman, “and if she did, I’d still stand by her…because that’s what we do for the people we love.”

Bernie smirks a bit, “Where were you in my younger years?”

“Busy being a fetus.” Ryan takes a sip from his mug of tea, “or else you’d have been right up my alley.”

Serena exhales as she finally enters the space, “Ryan, nice to see you again.” She sees the mug her wife had poured for herself and her daughter’s boyfriend. “She’s finally…calmed a bit. Evie said she had an outburst earlier today and Andrea was able to talk her down quite a bit. In an email sent by Andrea herself, she mentioned possibly getting Charlotte art supplies or proper writing instruments to give her an outlet for her frustrations and negative feelings.”

“Is she awake?” The young man raises an eyebrow, sounding almost hopeful.

Humming approvingly, Serena steps in more before she reaches over, taking a sip of Bernie’s tea from her mug. The young man making a hasty exit toward the stairs. She leans in, kissing her partner softly. “Andrea also suggested possible placement in a facility for a bit for her.”

“I don’t want to do that to her.” Bernie’s tone soft.

Serena stands in front of her partner, gently using her knuckle under Bernie’s chin to lift her head, “We may need to…for our sakes.”

Clearing her throat, Bernie feels tears in her eyes, uncertain tears, “I’m not prepared to have that conversation with her…nor do I think I need to. Couldn’t we simply increase her sessions with Annette?” She shakes her head, “I’m not giving up on her, Serena.”
“It isn’t giving up.”

“Seems a lot *like* giving up.”

Closing her eyes a moment, she sighs, “there was a man that came by today while at work. He was *there* with us...she had fixed his leg and stopped him from bleeding out. Saved his life, and his wife’s life by pulling her from a collapsed...something.” Serena shakes her head a little, “brought a handmade book cobbled together by numerous people wanting to share their stories and thank her.” She swallows, “I don’t know if it would be good for her or not. I don’t know if I can ever show her that book, Bernie.”

Furrowing her brow slightly, “this is about a book?”

“This is about moving on.” Serena shakes her head slowly, “I don’t expect it to happen overnight, but...she needs to be given the opportunity of a restful sleep instead of screaming or sobbing throughout the night, to be able to tend to her son without our worrying, to live without fear that she might try to hurt herself if she’s left alone...”

“It’s been less than a month, Serena.” Bernie answers quietly, “Nearly a fortnight of which she was unconscious for.” She turns away from her wife as she pushes a hand through her hair. “She’s only been home from hospital for a bit over a week. We need to be patient with her.” She lifts her head when a loud thud comes from the floor above.

“Let Ryan take care of it.” Serena sighs, taking a seat on the stool at the other side of the kitchen island.

Bernie shakes her head a little, “I’ve been there before...he hasn’t.” She gives a sad, closed mouth smile as she steps away from her wife to the doorway, then the stairs.
Chapter 135

Chapter Summary

Charlotte's trauma causes her to lash out at her partner.

Bernie has a heart to heart with her daughter in order to calm her.

Chapter Notes

Same day after last chapter.

Another double chapter day!

“Charlotte, you’re going to break something.” Ryan stands near her, his hands up in an innocent fashion, “If you want to throw things, even if they’re at me, we’ll go to an open field with a bucket full of tennis balls, but you’re going to break something here...and I know you’ll regret it later.” His tone is calm as he watches her, a fury about her. Something he doesn’t truly understand.

“No, no.” Charlotte shakes her head, pointing her cane toward him to keep him from embracing her. “You felt sorry for me. That’s the only reason you asked me to marry you. You don’t really love me...you don’t...you probably don’t ever really care about me...”

“I know you’re hurting, Ms. Wolfe. I know it’s-”

“You know nothing.” Her voice low, near a hiss. Charlotte walks closer to him, placing a hand on the post at the corner of the bed. “You knew that I lost the baby. You knew before me. You had two weeks to get a bloody ring made. You-”

Ryan stands up straighter, “Have you taken a single gander at that ring?” An incredulous look on his face, “You think it only required two weeks to cobble together?” He continues to hold his hands up, “Charlotte, come on. This is me. I’ve never lied to you. Never. I don’t plan on starting now.”

“I lost the fetus. You have no ties to me-” When he tries to move closer to her, she steps back, fear mixed with her angry panic.
“I love you, Charlotte Wolfe. I will always love you. I don’t care about anything else.” He stops moving when she picks up the lamp on her bedside table, tugging it from the wall. The office light from desk located in the room casting an eerie glow on her face. “I don’t know why you’re so angry with me, but I apologize for whatever I did.” He steps aside as Charlotte throws the lamp toward him, narrowly missing the man, only for the object to hit the corner of the door way.

“Bloody hell.” Bernie calls out, having the thing hit her in the arm as she interrupts. She sighs, scowling a little toward her daughter. “Mr. Anand, I believe it would be in your best interest to take your leave for the time being. I’ll message you later.”

Ryan nods absently, tears threatening his eyes. He clears his throat, lowering his arms, “I do love you, Char. Please, understand that.” He turns away from her, hastily making his exit from the darkened room.

“Was that quite necessary?” Bernie keeps her voice calm, noticing how agitated her daughter appears. The young woman holding onto her cane, placing the rubber end of it back onto the floor. She didn’t need it as much as she used to, but still used it for balance occasionally, “You’ve quite the aim though. I’m even a tad impressed.”

“He won’t leave me alone. He tries and tries and tries to phone, but I don’t want to talk to him. I want him to move on...find someone else.” Charlotte attempts to explain, her voice shaking. “He deserves someone else. Someone who isn’t me.” She licks her lips, “He doesn’t seem to understand that.”

“That doesn’t mean you should be rude to him.” Bernie moves closer to her daughter, taking a seat on the bed. The younger woman does the same a couple moments later. “Okay.” She nods slowly, looking forward instead of at the other woman, “aren’t you tired?”

“Should I be?”

“Well, with all that anger...”

Charlotte blinks slowly, “I don’t love him.”

“Repeating yourself and attempting to convince yourself...isn’t going to make it come true.” Bernie shakes her head, “this isn’t about him though. I’ve already told him to go.” She feels her daughter absently lean against her. “First off, let’s get your cannula on, please.”
“I don’t need it.” Char whispers, “I don’t want it.”

“Those are two different things.” Bernie reaches over to the tube, sitting dormant near her nightstand. Offering it to the young woman, she waits for the subtle nod before placing it onto her daughter’s face. “You’re in control here. You make the decisions and the rules that dictate your care. Do you agree?”

Nodding a little again, coughing a little and hissing, “Why do you ask?”

“Because your recent behavior, whether it be controlled or uncontrollable, conscious or unconscious, has led your therapist to believe a week in hospital may be a better option for you.” Bernie raises an eyebrow, “What do you think?”

“I don’t want to go back to hospital.” Char mumbles, leaning her head against the side of her mother’s shoulder, “are you going to make me go back?”

“No, of course not. It’s your decision.” She turns her head slightly, leaning her cheek against her daughter’s head, touched by her affection. “I need you to work harder though...with Annette, with doing the things you know you need to do...taking your medicine, using your oxygen, doing the physio as it’s prescribed to you.”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“I know it isn’t.” Bernie feels her daughter take her hand, “but I made the mistake before of not being brave enough. Made the mistake of pushing everyone away...everyone that loved and cared for me.” She swallows, “I’m not proud of the things that happened then. At the time, mental health wasn’t something to be...open about. Today it’s embraced...tending to that is no different than going to one’s dentist or GP.”

“I don’t care about that.” Charlotte bites her lip a little, chewing on the skin. “I don’t know how to make it stop.”

“It doesn’t stop, Charlotte.” Bernie inhales slowly and exhales just the same, “the things you’ve seen...will stay with you forever. However, you can not let them dictate the overarching course of your life. You can’t.” It’s obvious she speaks from experience, “I made that mistake so many years ago, Char. I came home after my first proper tour and...I wasn’t prepared for how I’d feel.”
“The things you saw?” She swallows, feeling herself calm a bit.

Bernie hums affirmingly, “Cameron was a toddler and I had only spoken to him over the telephone and through letters...I’d try to send pictures. I wanted to do right by him...and even your father.” She gives a soft smile, “when I came home, Cameron was happy to see me, but he didn’t know me. I had left so early that I didn’t really get the opportunity to...bond with him at the time. I loved him, but I didn’t bond with him until he was a bit older. I regret that.”

“Because of your trauma?” When her mother nods, Charlotte lifts her head to look at her mother more. “You’ve never told me any of this.”

“I’ve never told anyone except my therapist.” Bernie shrugs, “never saw the reason to until now.”

“It explains a lot.” Char glances away, “Cam and...how he favors Dad and...all that. Do you...do you worry that it may happen between Cole and I?”

“Sometimes.” Bernie nods slowly, “I’ve no reason to lie to you. It’s why, as you were growing up, I didn’t want you joining the military. You were so adamant about following in my footsteps, and that’s the last thing I wanted. Little did I know, you would...just not how either of us expected you to.”

“Finish.” She studies her mother’s facial expression, when Bernie glances to her, Char offers a slight smile, “what you were telling me. Did something else happen?”

“Well,” Bernie offers an amused grin, “I got to base. I had only been home for a month...six weeks tops before I returned to the field hospital. I was stationed in Bosnia. We were working on clean up efforts from the war. It was far from over...unlike what was said in the press.” She tilts her head to the side, “I had missed Christmas. I had been there for nearly two months at that point. In the thick of it.” Bernie adjusts her position on the bed to face her daughter more, “I wasn’t hungry, but I was in the mess hall with a few friends. Walking back to my table, I collapsed. Of course, my head went to dehydration, low sugar because I knew hadn’t eaten throughout the day.”

Char begins to grin, “Enter me.”

“It was the very last thing on my mind.” Bernie chuckles a little, “Of course, I was shipped back home immediately. Your father was elated. Cameron was happy that I would be there for his
birthday, as was I. Things kind of...calmed a bit. I was able to just...shut down mentally. Your father wouldn’t let me lift a finger even though it was an easy pregnancy, until the end. I think he understood I had other things occurring mentally from my time served, but...it was too little too late by that point.”

“You stayed longer with me than you did Cam.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, “Why is that?

“I named you Charlotte because you represented my own freedom. I was going to...change for you. Raise you to be more brave than I could ever imagine being. Make sure I...did better. I truly gave an honest attempt.” Bernie looks away, “However, I was called back when you were about five and...I’m sure you remember the rest.”

“I remember you coming to school, staying for a bit. Then you returned when we were teenagers. You invited Alex over whenever you had the chance and she was on leave.” Char brings her hand to her ear, adjusting the oxygen tube tucked behind her ear a bit better. “Cam and I knew, but...Dad was oblivious. You had heart eyes.”

Bernie blushes, nodding a little, “She helped me understand that what I was experiencing was normal...and completely fine. Taught me that I wasn’t alone. Never once gave up on me...until I gave up on her.” She huffs a soft sound of disappointment, “Had things not worked out the way they did, I would have never met the love of my life.”

“You aren’t really making a case for Ryan.” Char’s voice is soft.

“I’m not trying to. You told me to finish the story.” Bernie absently strokes the back of her daughter’s hand, “however, my story goes on. Not ending until I end, then still it lives on through you and Cameron...and even Cole.” She blinks slowly, opening her mouth for a moment before speaking, “I suppose the moral of...or what I’m attempting to get through to you is pushing people away and shutting oneself off from the world doesn’t make this feel better. In fact, it only makes it worse. Yes, it’s still fresh and you’ve encountered multiple traumatic incidents that have just...stacked on top of one another, but it’s only going to lessen the blow if you face them head on...instead of fearing the pain of the experiences. At least, that’s what I’ve learned through all of mine.”

“No short cuts.” The young woman’s voice just above a whisper, “No hiding, no running... I promise you I won’t.” Char nods a little, her eyes damp, her emotions starting to blend into her voice, “Do you think he actually loves me?”

“Yeah, a tad.” The corner of Bernie’s mouth turns up in a smirk, “He was going to propose marriage
on your weekend holiday that became ruined, stayed every day with you in hospital, was Cole’s treating consultant even though it risked conflict of interest documentation, and even removed Serena’s breathing tube when she came through because he didn’t want her to suffer.” She licks her lips, inhaling and exhaling before continuing, “If he doesn’t love you, he’s trying awful hard to convince us otherwise.”
Chapter 136

Chapter Summary

Bernie and Serena spend some time with their grandson.

Cole displays some echoes from his injuries months prior.

Chapter Notes

Same day as last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bernie enters her bedroom, not surprised to find her wife there. “I had a feeling you would keep him close tonight.” She nods toward her grandson, who is cuddled up against Serena’s side, but watching some calming Baby Einstein video playing classical music. “Like most nights anymore.”

Serena glances over to the blonde in the doorway, reading from a book, “he’s nearly mastered climbing from the cot. I don’t want to risk a bump to the head just yet.” She shakes her head, “besides, I want to see you put him back with his clingy thing he does...and that pout, my giddy aunt, that pout.”

“I know it well.” She sighs, starting to unbutton her blouse. “Ryan left without incident?”

“No, he’s downstairs.”

Bernie pauses, tilting her head to the side, “I’m sorry, what?”

“I told him to stay the night. Try again in the morning.” Serena raises an eyebrow, keeping her face in the book, “or was that a bad idea?”

The blonde shakes her head negatively, “No...no, it’s fine. Glad Cameron returned home or else he would have been in for a shock...stumbling home from Albie’s.” She returns to what she was doing, “I kind of laid everything out for her. I...I only hope it’s gotten through.” Bernie tosses her shirt into the hamper.
“Laid everything out. I haven’t the foggiest what that means, but I assume things went well.”

“As well as they could of.” Bernie replies softly, making quick work of pulling on her pajamas, “We need to buy her a new side table lamp.”

Serena glances over as her partner begins to crawl into bed, “What happened to the old one?”

“It got kind of...broken.” She exhales slowly, her grandson eager to climb onto her in order to rest his head on her chest. Bernie absentely begins to rub the boy’s back, they did this most nights anymore. The room falls silent before Bernie starts to speak with the woman next to her, “you know, all our focus has been on Charlotte...and I think I’ve been neglecting you.”

“I don’t feel you have.” Serena slides a ribbon bookmark between the pages of her book before setting it to her own side table.

“How are you, Serena?”

“I’m fine.” She turns to her side, better to face her wife, “I hardly remember anything from a month ago and I think that’s worked to my advantage.” Serena offers a sad smile, “Annette thinks it may be some repression, but...the bruises are healed, as are the sutures. I’d say I’m doing pretty well.”

Bernie feels the woman pull up against her side, fully locked in by her wife and their grandson, “I didn’t get the opportunity to really ask, how was your first day back?”

Serena holds onto her wife’s arm, “They applauded when I walked in.” She hears the blonde start to chuckle to herself, garnering a pout from their grandson, “Oh, there goes the lip.”

“I’m so sorry, cub.” Bernie says soothingly, averting her eyes from her wife as to keep from laughing again. She hears the boy start whimpering, his low, painful hum. “Do you have a headache?” She tilts her head, trying to see her grandson’s face.

Reaching over to the side table next to her, she obtains the bottle of infant paracetamol. Edging herself to sit up a bit, Serena uses the dropper to pull up the usual amount of medication. “He gets them often at night, have you noticed?”
“Yeah,” Bernie nods a little, “Still sensitive to light and loud sounds as well at times.” She sighs, “poor thing screamed when I attempted to hoover earlier. I’m considering one of those Roombas.” Bernie uses the television remote, turning it off, “not to mention that probably isn’t helping...even though I know he loves it.”

Serena puts the dropper in the baby’s mouth, blowing air into his face to cause him to swallow. She screws the top back onto the medication, returning it to the side table. “Poor boy.” She sighs softly, “Do you think...” Serena pauses, trying to decide the wording, “do you think he may remember things as well?”

The thought had never occurred to Bernie, as she continues to soothe the boy, who seems to only want her. “That’s something you’d probably need to ask a specialist.” She licks her lips, glad the rest of the room lighting was relatively low, “when they’re small, there’s no way to know anything. Their thought process.”

“Charlotte and some first responders said he was just sleeping against me.” Serena shakes her head, “I truly don’t remember.”

“It’s okay.” Bernie says softly, taking hold of her wife’s hand, “It isn’t important, honestly. Cole probably isn’t going to remember anything about it. He’s too young, Serena. It isn’t anything to worry about.” She tilts her head again to look at her grandson’s face, seeing his heavy lidded eyes open, grinning toward his Nan.

Serena begins to smile, leaning in to softly kiss the boy’s eyebrow. “What’s the likelihood of Charlotte sleeping through the night tonight?” The young woman often woke most of the house with her sobbing in her sleep, something she was hardly aware of occurring until she felt something holding her tenderly.

Humming at the thought, Bernie raises an eyebrow, “Slim to none.” When her partner seems confused, she continues, “Thanks to your devious efforts, Ryan’s here. I have no doubt that he’ll take care of her and allow us some, or nearly some, alone time.”

“We can try the travel cot with him tomorrow, if you want. Sides are higher and more difficult for him to climb out.” Serena slides down under the covers more, comfortably holding onto her wife’s arm again, resting her head in the crook of the blonde’s neck. “Have the bed to ourselves.” She lifts her free hand, gently stroking her grandson’s hair with her nails.
“You’re the number one offender of letting him sleep in bed with us.”

“The power of the pout.” Serena watches as the boy falls asleep, swaddled in love by the arms of his grandmothers. Hearing Bernie’s steady breathing, she isn’t far behind.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting so close to the end and I truly can't believe it. I have quite a few chapters written for the next story in the series already. The ending of this story has quite a surprise, but I've referenced it quite a few times so it may not be as big a surprise as one would expect. <3
Chapter 137

Chapter Summary

Charlotte heeds her mother's advice.

Ryan remains steadfast in his support of his fiance.

Chapter Notes

Hours after the last chapter.

Ryan opens his eyes as the smell of lemons wafts about the air. Rubbing his hands over his face, he gives a glance to his wristwatch, furrowing his brow. Noticing the light in the kitchen radiating to the foyer, he stands, following it. Bleary eyed, he squints slightly at the harsh light. “Ms. Wolfe...”

Charlotte stirs a pot on the stove, glancing over when she hears his pet name for her. “Why did you stay?”

He wouldn’t give Serena up, of course he wouldn’t. “Your parents said you’re a pain in the arse, so here I am, ready to tend to you so they can sleep. It’s half past three in the morning, what are you doing?”

Her smaller oxygen tank in a backpack type of bag on her back, “It’s half past three in the morning and I’m making cake, Mr. Anand. Haven’t made cake, or attempted to, in quite a while.” Char pauses, “Not this cake especially. Really made a mess of it the last time.”

“Well, what type is it?” Ryan steps in more, not understanding why he decided to investigate this. However, he isn’t about to stop now. At least she wasn’t shouting or throwing things at him. He nears the stools at the kitchen island, sliding onto a seat, “Anything I can do to help?”

“I’ve reduced lung function, I’m not an invalid. Though, last I did this, I drank all the rum, burnt the lemons, and cut my hand.” She turns toward him, pointing to the small scar on her palm that was left from the incident. Char huffs softly, amused now by what she wasn’t then. Turning back to the stove, she gingerly places the pieces of candied lemons onto a cooling rack. Carefully offering one to the man after a moment, making sure it isn’t too hot.
His face appears downcast, studying the portion of candied lemon in the woman’s hand, “I didn’t know you were still on the oxygen.”

“You didn’t ask.” When he doesn’t take the candy right away, she places it in his slightly ajar mouth. Turning back around, she returns to her cake batter. “It’s...something I’m working really hard on overcoming...among other things.”

“Why aren’t you asleep?” Ryan continues to watch her, moving about the kitchen with such grace.

“No, no, no.” Char shakes her head, “No, I’m not tired, you see. I’m making cake.” It has nothing to do with sleep and everything to do with not wanting to dream, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

“Don’t make jokes like that, Ms. Wolfe.” His voice soft as he swallows back his emotions.

She bites her lip, glad she’s turned away from him. “I suppose...you’d like the ring back...as awful as I’ve been to you as of late.” Char pauses, mixing by hand even though there’s a stand mixer not ten feet from her. Sometimes, it just tastes better like this. She isn’t sure how much she wants to go into how often she studied the ring he gave her.

“No, it’s yours.” Ryan clears his throat a little, “even if you’ve...changed your mind about our engagement, it’s still yours. Treat it like a memory maybe.” He wants to cry, but also doesn’t want to trigger an outburst from her, “the day we met, the...times we had together. If that’s truly what you want.”

Char clenches her jaw, her emotion seeping into her voice finally, “that isn’t what I want, but...”

“Then why in the hell do you keep trying to push me away?” He sits up a bit, furrowing his brow, “You continually accuse me of not loving you enough or...you tell me I deserve better.” Ryan shakes his head, “Why?”

“Because you do.” The room falls silent, “You deserve someone healthy...someone who can give you all the things in life that you want. Things I can’t give you.”

“There’s a flaw in your reasoning.” He watches as she turns, raising an eyebrow, “What I want in
life is you. I think of you when I wake in the morning, while at work, and when I lay my head down to sleep. If I were any sort of singer, I’d write every single song about you.” Ryan smiles a bit, “Don’t you get that?”

“I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Char places half of her candied lemons into her cake batter, “Constantly...waiting. Just...just waiting.”

“You have trust issues with men, I get that. It’s totally understandable given your past, but...you should look to the future. Whether that future be with me...or not.”

“I’m no prize. Quite the opposite.”

Ryan rubs his hands over his face, taking a moment before he speaks, “Stop. Stop discouraging yourself. You’re utterly brilliant, incredibly clever, immensely creative, and let us not mention breathtaking-”

It causes Char to smirk, amused, “Breathtaking is right.” She mumbles, glancing to him when he goes silent, a look on his face as if he may have just offended her. “It’s a joke, Mr. Anand.” She carefully pours her batter into a couple of baking pans before sliding them into the preheated oven. “Now, should I go for a glaze or icing...” She folds her arms, not expecting any sort of answer from him.

“If you’re putting rum into the cake, a thick icing might make it too heavy.” Ryan mumbles.

“Not to mention I can make a rum and lemon based glaze. Blimey, very good, Mr. Anand.” She begins to grin, “but that shouldn’t take terribly long,” Slowly rounding the kitchen island, she moves closer to him, gently turning his head with her hand for better access. She leans in, pressing a tender kiss against Ryan’s lips. Breaking apart, it’s like she begins searching his face for something, what that is, she doesn’t know.

Staring at her lips, then eyes, “I love you, Ms. Wolfe.”

“After everything?”

“Especially after everything.” Ryan leans toward her, capturing her lips a bit more deeply, “I want to be the one you turn to when you can’t bother anymore, or when you’re scared, or in pain. I can help
“You.” He carefully wraps his arms around her, “Your mothers aren’t the only ones who can keep you safe. I will go out of my way to do it.”

“I’m...” Char swallows, “When is your next day off?”

“Tomorrow.” He tilts his head to the side, “I was going to watch after you and Cole while your parents are working, but thought I may have had to change my plans when you weren’t terribly keen on seeing me earlier.” He flashes a quick smirk, “Why do you ask?”

“I want to...take you to my house.” When she notices his confused expression, Char continues, “the one I own. I think it’s time I...finally give it up and I need you to see it before I do.” She pauses, beginning to smirk, “Also, there’s some great cars, you may want one.”

She’s never really spoken about that stuff with him, “It won’t upset you to go back?”

“It may, but I need to just...do my best to overcome it. I don’t care about the cars. They’re...” She pauses, thinking of the words, “when I was in the accident with my ex, which...snowballed all the rest of this and just seems so long ago now, the car was totaled. There were three others. He was a bit of a collector. They’re...quite nice.” Charlotte nods, “I’ll sell what we don’t want. I need to just...let that portion of my life finally go.” She begins to grin, “a weight lifted off my shoulders and money in my pocket, I’ve had cleaners pop over once a week since Anders’ death. So...that will be nice to let go.”

Ryan beams, “I think it’s a great idea, Ms. Wolfe.” He knows how big of a step it is for her and he’s so proud of her for taking it. Ryan knows he couldn’t possibly tell her how much. “So...we’re okay then, right?”

Charlotte nods a little, “We can...have a marriage license drawn up. We’ll need to pop over to your place to get the things needed.” She hasn’t left the house since returning home from hospital. “I think the faster we put this into motion, the faster my insecurities are put to rest. As long as you’re good with that.”

“As long as you can wait twenty-eight days.” He researched, of course he researched.

“Or we can pull a fast one like my parents did. Take a few days holiday and...go somewhere, anywhere.” Char raises an eyebrow, “I’m not one for...ceremony. If that’s okay with you.” She pauses, “I know your mother will be...a tad cross.”
Ryan shakes his head, “I think it’s a great idea.” He pecks her lips again, “make your glaze, Ms. Wolfe. Your cake is nearly baked.” Another peck, “we’ll speak of this tomorrow...after a bit of a rest before your parents head out.” When he senses she’s about to object, he continues, “I’ll hold onto you...keep away the memories.” He had a feeling that’s what the making of this cake was about in the first place.

Charlotte nods a little, leaning in to kiss him deeply again. She would try her hardest to follow her mother’s advice, if it was the last thing she’d do.
Chapter 138

Chapter Summary

An excited Charlotte causes Serena to worry.

Ric calls out his friend for what he believes is her irrational reactions.

Chapter Notes

Roughly a week after last chapter. Roughly. Might be a bit more, but not by much.

Double chapter today because why not?

Charlotte enters through the gray double doors of the AAU, her son holding onto her finger, a reusable tote bag in her other hand. It isn’t terribly busy, but busy enough. She lifts her head when she notices Ric Griffin smiling broadly toward her from the nurse’s station. “My future ex-husband.” Her small oxygen tank in a pack on her back, cannula at her nose.

“That’s not what I hear.” Ric embraces the young woman after walking closer to her. “Broke my heart to learn you’ve gotten engaged.”

She gives an affirmative hum, “doesn’t diminish my love for you though.” Hearing the man’s soft chuckle, she glances around, “Serena about?”

“In theater, laparotomy, but she’s been in for a while at this point. Should be finishing up any time now.” He looks down, noticing the boy holding onto his mother’s finger, just hoping to be noticed. “Cole, look how big you’ve gotten.” He crouches, lifting him into his arms.

“His first birthday is quickly approaching and I feel ancient.” Char grins, “So...there’s that.”

“You’re looking much better than you were last I saw you.” Ric nods toward the young woman, motioning for her to follow him into the office as he leads the way, “In fact, I’d say much, much better. You were in a coma.” He sets the boy on Serena’s office chair, sitting in his own on the opposite side of the desk.
“Ryan had to grab a few things from his office.” Charlotte lowers herself into the sofa underneath the windows, pulling her oxygen pack to the space next to her. “Made lunch for my parents, with a few extras. Have you eaten?”

“Just a coffee this morning.”

“Steak and Nappa Salad with Miso dressing.” Char reaches into the reusable tote, removing the decent sized salad. She leans over, sliding it onto his desk. “You like steak, don’t you?” She pauses, “and don’t give me any of that well-done nonsense. It’s just burning a perfectly good steak.”

“I haven’t any lemon cake as repayment.” Ric smirks, glancing over to Cole, who is just in awe with the room around him.

“Did Serena bring by any of the rum sour cake? I told her to bring you a slice.” Charlotte turns off her oxygen, removing the cannula from her face. Just for a moment at least. She rubs her hands over her face, watching as the man opens the container. “Sorry, I just keep thinking about people who prefer well-done steak. That cow gave it’s life to be delicious and anyone who prefers their steak well-done is just pissing on that animal’s memory.”

Chuckling a bit, Ric takes a deep break, “Haven’t changed a single bit, I see.”

“And why should I?” Char knows the answer to that, but offers an amused scowl toward the man, “with plenty of intensive outpatient therapy and...” She bounces her leg at the toes, “when Ryan and I went to the registrar's office, which my parents don’t know about by the way, so...”

“My lips are sealed, as you know.” Glad he kept a bit of silverware in his desk drawer, Ric stabs at the beautiful salad, moaning softly with delight, “This is delicious.”

“I’m glad you like it.” The young woman adjusts her position on the sofa, leaning back a bit to continue her story, “We went to the registrar's office and...the desk attendant, older woman, recognizes me from news reports. Asks to take pictures with me on her mobile and for my autograph. This whole thing.” She begins to smile with the thought of the whole ordeal, “Ryan steps to the side, what I thought was him pretending to be on his mobile, and speaks into it for a few moments. Then steps back over to us when we finish. I didn’t give it much thought.”

“Quite famous you are, Charlotte.” Rick nods, “I should have asked you about it myself.”
“He comes bounding in a couple days later with this...proud look on his face. Opens his jacket and reveals the t-shirt underneath saying *My Girlfriend is Famous.*” Charlotte grins a bit, listening as the man laughs again. She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. She notices Serena is standing at the nurses’ station, still in her scrubs after theater. “I’ve an idea.”

“I need him on fifteen minute obs and if you could give him a bit of a wash up, that would be lovely.” Serena nods, placing the patient file onto the desk for Donna to enter the new information into it. She runs a hand through her hair, leopard print scrub cap tucked under her arm. Serena makes her way to the office she shares with her friend, closing the door behind herself. Her eyes closed as she exhales, leaning against the closed door. “Perforated intestine. Only a teenager. What a mess.”

“Serena, meet the new registrar on our ward.” Ric begins, watching as the woman quickly opens her eyes, an embarrassed look on her face.

Cole claps, grinning toward the woman as soon as she entered the room, “Nan.” His voice rough, as it always has been. The boy extends a grabby hand toward her, eager for her attention, as he often is.

“Now, Dr. Wolfe, that will be enough. No special treatment will be given under my watch.” Ric pretends a stern look toward the babe. “Just because Serena is your grandmother, doesn’t mean she’s going to coddle you through your pursuits. You’re supposed to be more professional than that.”

Serena chuckles, low and throaty. Gathering the boy in her arms before he has the opportunity to stand. “Where is Charlotte?”

“Can’t get ever one past you.” Char carefully stands from the opposite side of the desks, having been on the floor. “I brought your lunch.” She moves around to the sofa, reaching into the tote.

Serena tilts her head to the side, raising an eyebrow, “You’re full of energy today.”

“It’s a good day.” She grins toward her, her voice quieting, “is that okay?”

“I thought Ryan would be with you since your mother and I are here.” Serena knows this, she’s seen this plenty of times already. These highs are always met with lows, “Have you popped up to Keller?”

Charlotte blinks, “No, not yet.” She pauses, realizing she isn’t wanted here, not really. “We’d better
get out of here. I know you hate your scrubs and you probably want to change as quickly as possible.” Charlotte slowly brings her nasal cannula back to her face, tucking a portion behind her ear. She turns the machine back on, putting on the back pack. Charlotte licks her lips, offering her hands toward her son, unable to meet Serena’s gaze.

Serena glances to the babe in her arms, not wanting to let him go. She takes a moment, reluctantly handing the babe over. “Pop up to Keller? I’ll let your mother know-”

“No, uh...I think I’ll just drop off her food and be on my way.” Charlotte settles her son on her hip, picking up her tote bag in the other hand. She gives a quick glance toward Ric, “Nice seeing you again.”

“Likewise.” Ric watches as the young woman takes her exit, glancing back over toward his friend, “She came to see you, not me.”

“She shouldn’t be alone, especially not with Cole.” Serena leans her hands on her desk, inhaling deeply. “Ryan paid for her to take her driving test, she passed, as we knew she would. She’s had the provisional license since she was sixteen.” The woman shakes her head, “more freedom means more...worrying.”

“Do you doubt her ability to drive?”

“Her panic attacks haven’t stopped. She has them at...random intervals. Inopportune moments.” Serena attempts to explain, “it’s why I’ve had Evie Fletcher sit with her, help with Cole. When Ryan is off, he’s...he’s supposed to stay with her. Just in case.”

“Serena, she...” Ric pauses, trying to find his wording, “she’s cooking again, able to take the oxygen off, moving around without a cane.” He watches as Serena stands straighter, “what exactly do you want to happen? Do you not expect her to progress?”

“That isn’t...” She heard the same song and dance from her therapist. “I’ve wiped her tears and held her close for nearly two years now as she’s tried to deal with her own traumas. In that time, she and I have nearly been killed twice...and both times, she’s saved my life.” Serena takes a moment before continuing, “the last thing I want is for her mind to be the thing that’s kills her.”

“You don’t believe the intensive therapy worked?
“I don’t believe she even went.” Serena sighs, taking another look at the salad on her desk. She moves toward the office door, tugging it open, “I need to get out of these sodding scrubs.”
Chapter 139

Chapter Summary

Dom Copeland and Cameron realize how similar their situations are.

Cole makes a new friend.

Cam worries about his sister.

Chapter Notes

So much is about to happen in these last eleven chapters. I just can't thank everyone enough for staying along for the ride. Your continued support means so very much to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dom stands at the nurses’ station, nudging his shoulder into Cameron’s. “So, working with your Mum again. Just like old times, isn’t it?”

Cam chuckles a little to himself, nodding slowly. “I suppose so. I know she’d rather be on AAU or ED though. More her speed...her forte if she doesn’t have a Trauma bay.” He turns around, his back leaning against the desk as he just watches the unit. “Fast medicine.”

“This is fast at times.” Dom attempts to reason with the other man, then tilts his head from side to side, waiting a beat, “okay, maybe not. However, for experience, it’s fantastic.” He smirks a little, “my Mum over in YAU and your Mum...being bumped up to Keller consult which...good for her.”

“Oh, that’s right, forgot about that for you.” Cam nods, “Yeah, quite the lucky pair of blokes we are.” His tone drips with sarcasm.

“I mean, there was never really any question that she’d be given consult again.” Dom shrugs, straightening his back when he sees Charlotte enter through the door, “Hey there.” He smiles toward the young woman, holding his hands out for the boy, who just holds onto his mother more instead. “Oh, well, fine then.”

“He’s been clingy lately.” Cameron offers, “What brings you round, Darling Charlotte?” He gives a
wave when his nephew does the same for him.

“I brought you lunch. I was going to...spend a few minutes, but I’m not really up for it anymore.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, “sorry.”

Cam furrows his brow a bit, seeing something in his sister’s eye, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just take the food...for you and Mum. Hopefully you haven’t eaten yet.” Even her voice sounds a bit downcast. Charlotte holds out the tote, “just tell Mum to take it home with her tonight and I’ll make you all something for tomorrow, if you want.” She glances over when her son begins to clap excitedly, realizing he’s just seen his grandmother. “Alright, calm down, she’s busy.” She sighs, when the boy doesn’t stop.

“Here, I’ll pop over so he can say hello.” Dom holds his hands out again, tilting his head toward the direction of where Bernie just was, smirking when the boy excitedly goes to him this time. “There we go. Uncle Dom will rescue you.” He begins to walk away from the siblings.

“Really though, are you okay?” Cam raises a worried eyebrow, “something on your mind?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Char answers quietly, glancing to the tote still in her hand. She carries the bag to her mother’s office, sensing her brother has followed in behind her, “it isn’t as if you care, Cameron. So, let’s not pretend-”

“I do though. I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

“I’d really rather not, please.” She answers him quietly, carefully taking the pack from her back and accessing her level of oxygen left. “I knew I didn’t properly charge this last night.” Charlotte doesn’t quite look at him, but glances in his general direction, “do you mind if I-”

Cameron smirks, raising a mischievous eyebrow, “only if you tell me what happened.”

Dom gives a quick glance over his shoulder, seeing the siblings have moved from where they were. He shrugs, glancing to the boy in his arms who is trying to glance around curtains as they pass them. He stands just outside the curtain. “Where is she?” He whispers to the boy, seeing him trying to move around for a look.
Cole leans down, asking to be put on the floor. Once Dom does as he’s asked, the boy peeks behind the curtain, grinning broadly when he sees his grandmother. He stands there, waiting to be noticed.

Bernie sees something out of the corner of her eye, but decides to finish with her patient. She’s sure she can see Dominic Copeland, knowing this is of his relation. “Does he always loom, Mrs. Chiltern?”

Sheilagh Chiltern smirks a bit, “No, he’s the sweet one of my boys. Not like Piggy.” She tilts her head a bit more, “he isn’t alone though.” Her smile grows a bit when the boy takes hold of his grandmother’s leg, “reckon that little one belongs to you. Has your eyes.”

Glancing down, Bernie offers her grandson a smile, “One moment, please.” She continues with the woman in the bed, “That would be my grandson, Cole.” She sees Dom approach more, lifting the boy and placing him on the woman’s bed. “Is Charlotte here?”

“Yes, she and Cameron are speaking...somewhere.” Dom shrugs, keeping the boy contained as Bernie finishes up a few sutures on the older woman’s upper arm, “Gran, how adorable is this one?”

“Quite handsome. If I didn’t have my arm all bundled up, I’d love a good cuddle.” Sheilagh smiles a bit more, her crystal blue eyes dancing. She watches as the boy just stares at what his grandmother is doing, “is his father the one I’ve seen accidentally calling you Mum around here?” She pauses, “Dr. Dunn, isn’t it?”

“Oh, no. No, he belongs to my daughter, Charlotte.” Bernie smirks, “Dr. Dunn is my son, Cameron. Yes.” She’s always found this woman quite amusing, though also quite clumsy. “I would have thought Dom would have given you the low down before or upon your arrival.”

Dom rolls his eyes playfully, “Why the sutures before surgery?”

“Well, her fracture is in her forearm. Which is where we’ll be operating once theater opens up. I had some free time and this is something that can be completed quickly without requiring general anesthesia, just a localized numbing agent, so why take up more theater time if we don’t need to?” Bernie smirks, “Make sense to you, Dr. Copeland?”

“I suppose so. Keeps everything moving.” Dom holds the boy back when he tries to get closer to watch his grandmother’s hands as they suture. “No one could ever say you aren’t efficient.”
Sheilagh is amused greatly by the inquisitive babe, then furrows her brow, remembering, “Wait, is his mother the one that saved all those people?” She pauses, glancing back to the consultant, “Yes, I remember from the news reports. She’s your daughter. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Bernie nods a little, “I really don’t like people to know about it here though. My son and wife may work here, but I do like some separation between my work and home life.”

“Oh, why not? My Dominic was among the ones to save her, he and one of his mothers.” She shakes her head, “not to mention, she’s a bleeding legend.” Sheilagh pauses, “takes after her Mum, I’d bet.”

“She does.” Dom smirks.

“She’s far more impressive than I am.” Bernie finishes up, cleaning up the unused supplies and removing her gloves, tossing them into the bin. She puts a few pumps of antibacterial foam into her palms before holding her hands out for the boy.

“Ga.” Cole points to the Sheilagh’s hurt arm, but looks to his grandmother.

“We’re finished with that right now.” Bernie shakes her head, still holding her hands out toward him.

“Ga, no.” The boy shakes his head, wanting his grandmother to finish helping the woman. Cole tries to climb up to the woman’s un-hurt side, “he’p.”

“Cole, we’re finished helping right now. Let’s go and look for Mum and Uncle Cam.” Bernie nears the boy more, scowling playfully at the pout he’s now giving her.

“Another doctor on your hands, Ms. Wolfe.” Sheilagh watches the pair, but places the hand of her healthy arm onto his back out of habit and instinct. “A whole family of doctors.” When the boy glances over toward her, displaying his pout that he’d been giving his Gran, she acts surprised, “I can see how that works for you, young man. I’d give you whatever you wanted with that look. I imagine it gets people in trouble.”

Bernie lifts the boy into her arms finally, “and that pout is what he does to get his way, yes. Often
used for snacks when he’s told no.” She rubs his back when he lies his head onto her shoulder, “Hopefully theater opens soon. There’s only two more ahead of you.”

“Yes, well, I could have just not broken my arm, but there you go.” Sheilagh raises an eyebrow, “Will you bring him back around after the surgery? Before I depart, at least.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Mrs. Chiltern.” Bernie gives the woman a wink as she takes her leave, seeing Dom following behind her, “Where are my children, Dr. Copeland?”

“They were just at the desk, then they weren’t.” Dom shrugs, “If you’d like for me to go and look for them and take Cole with me and just leave because they’re adults don’t really need to be watched over and will return in due time-” He begins to ramble, jesting with the woman a bit.

Bernie ignores the man, making her way to her office. “Let me know when theater opens.” She calls out, opening the door to her office, “this is why we should lock this door. Strangers coming in here.” She had a feeling her children would be in the room. “Usually we do, but...”

Cameron turns quickly, “Char brought us lunch.” He covers for his sister, knowing she isn’t going to want to talk anymore. “Her oxygen pack was low as well. So we took care of that too.”

“Then Cole saw you for a moment and Dom gave in to him.” Charlotte smirks a little, “he wasn’t much trouble, was he?”

“No, his husband’s grandmother is poorly. Shattered both bones in her forearm after a fall.” Bernie sighs, “seems a bit...accident prone.” She huffs a soft sound of amusement, “Did you pop down to AAU already?”

Char nods, “delivered Serena and Ric both lunch.” She doesn’t go into it, “so, now I’m just waiting on my pack to charge enough and I’ll be on my way. I’m sorry for bothering the both of you.”

“You aren’t bothering.” Bernie shakes her head, watching her daughter still. She quickly surmises that something probably happened on AAU, but isn’t completely sure what it could be. Bernie cuddles her grandson when he starts to snuggle up against her, “I will say, he’s quite the charmer, Mrs. Chiltern couldn’t get enough of him.”

“Wolfe irresistibility?” Cameron waves his brows before making a face toward his nephew, hearing
a soft chortle come from his mother’s direction.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, I wish I would have brought Sheilagh around more. This is, literally, the only chapter she's in. Sorry. *sadface*
“What happened today?” Bernie settles with her wife within the confines of Albie’s. They haven’t been in quite a while, and definitely haven’t been since the attack. It’s a nice change of pace, honestly. “I had Char in my office, all clammed up.”

“What makes you think it was something with me?” Serena furrows her brow, watching the woman.

“I’m both clever and have brilliant powers of deduction.” Bernie takes a sip from her glass of scotch, hearing her wife’s low chuckle, “also Cameron gave me a recap of what Char told him. So, I’m receiving this information...third-hand? Not even second-hand.”

“Nothing happened.” The silver haired consultant sips from her glass of Shiraz.

“Well, something must have.” She raises an eyebrow, “Charlotte was quite...bothered.”

“She wasn’t when she was on AAU.” Serena leans back on the sofa within the confines of the bar. “Bouncing off the walls.” She pauses, “well, maybe not that bad, but just...an overflowing amount of energy. We’ve seen that before and we know what comes next. I’d prefer it if she wasn’t alone, especially with Cole, when it hits.”

“Ah.” Bernie nods slowly, understanding. “That clears a few things up.”
“Such as?”

“You don’t trust her.”

“That isn’t true.” Serena shakes her head slowly, “I trust her...” She pauses, “I trust her with my life, of course.” The woman pauses, taking another sip of her wine. She begins to think about the way she worded what she’s said to the young woman earlier in the day. “I trust her, Bernie. I wouldn’t want her in the house if I didn’t.”

“Yet you don’t trust her to tend to her own son.” Bernie tilts her head to the side, not bothered in the slightest that they’re having this conversation is such a loud, busy setting. In fact, she’d rather speak about this here than their own quiet home. Whatever takes her mind on just how noisy the space seems tonight.

The woman falls quiet, lifting a hand to run her own nails through the hair at her temple in thought. It was something she had spoken about often to Annette Vickers as of late. “She wanted to...run away not terribly long ago. Wanted to just leave him with us.” Serena takes another sip, “not to mention just how often we tend to him anyway while she hides away in her bedroom or gallivanting around with Ryan. I feel my worries are founded. If you feel I’m wrong or that she’s more stable than what I give her credit for-”

Bernie leans over, gently placing her hand over her wife’s. “I don’t feel they’re unfounded.” When the silver haired woman appears surprised, she continues, “however-”

“No, Bernie, no however. It’s either you feel the same way or you don’t. Not that I’m asking you to take sides. I don’t need approval.”

“However, I reckon she should have a chance.” Bernie answers quietly, “Cole loves his mother greatly, as do we.” She notices her partner paying attention, but pretending she isn’t. “We also love Cole a great deal, as does Charlotte. I reckon we’ve sort of...impeded on her adventures into motherhood. We’re there to protect her while she’s down, of course, but...I believe we’ve both been in her same boat, haven’t we? I ran to the Army, you dived into your work in the hospital. We weren’t the best mothers, but that didn’t mean we didn’t love our children any less. We just...underestimated how much they needed us.”

Serena nods a little, licking her lips with a gentle dart of her tongue, “Yes.”
“We aren’t forcing her into staying. Not in the least. However, discounting her abilities because of her past behavior due to her own trauma is—”

“Bernie, it’s more than one traumatic incident. It’s more than her time with Anders Hero. It’s more than Boxing Day. It’s more than her coping methods when the bastard died. It’s even more than Juniper Street. This is a great many things all rolled together. Do I think Ryan’s presence helps her through those things? Yes. Do I believe Ryan cares a great deal for Cole and would consider raising him as his own? Yes, he already has been thus far.” Serena pauses, inhaling and exhaling, “It was what...a week or so? A week ago, she was screaming at him to leave her alone.”

“Which isn’t any of our business.” Bernie leans back in her seat.

“How isn’t it?” Serena shakes her head, “she broke a lamp by throwing it at the poor boy. Would your outlook change if Cole was in the room with her? Seeing the outburst or even being hit by something she’s thrown out of anger or frustration?” She turns her head, meeting her partner’s eyes, “not to mention how quickly things changed the morning after?”

Bernie licks her lips, taking a sip from her scotch. “Serena—”

“And rumor has it that Ryan is in the process of looking for a house. Meaning, he’s going to want them to follow suit. Just think about that for a moment.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.” The blonde shakes her head, “she doesn’t live with him now, nor does she go over to his flat terribly often. Only on occasion. She’s only taken Cole a couple of times.”

“Only letting us know a half hour ahead of time and usually leaving Cole in our care when she doesn’t take him.” Serena continues, “I love Cole more than anything, as you know. Between he and Guinevere, I’d give them both the sun and moon. It isn’t fair to him though. None of this is.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, and I too worry about that, but...we still need to give her a chance.” Bernie explains, “she’s doing better now than she has. Her time of intensive therapy was—”

“It didn’t exist.”

Bernie stops her line of thought, looking to the woman, “What?”
“The intensive therapy, I asked Annette Vickers about it.” Serena shakes her head negatively, “didn’t exist.”

“Well...maybe it was with someone other than her...” Bernie’s voice is hoarse, full of hope. She takes a moment, knowing her daughter wouldn’t speak to just anyone. She brings her short glass to her lips, downing what was left of her drink, “we cannot fault her simply because of mental illness.” Her voice is softer than she thought it would be, trying to make her point. “I won’t do that to her.”

“I’m not going to either, all I’m saying is that she shouldn’t be left alone for long periods of time...and if she is, she definitely shouldn’t be on her lonesome with Cole.”

“Do I even...should we even mention the therapy with Char?” Bernie lifts her hand, running it through her hair, she inhales slowly, “I didn’t come here for this. I came here to relax with you because we haven’t in...too long.” Exhaling she lifts her head, more than glad when she sees Adrian Fletcher nearing the pair. “Fletcher!” Bernie announces, chuckling as the man playfully bounds onto her lap.

“You two should join the party.” Fletch motions before sitting up, “Everything alright? Evie was curious if it would be okay for her to visit again.” He tilts his head to the side, “she thought she may have done something wrong that you haven’t phoned for her.”

“Oh, Evie should know she doesn’t ever need to wait for one of us to ask her over.” Serena waves her hand a little to dismiss the question, “Mikey on the other hand...”

“I like Mikey. He reminds me of Cameron when he was a boy.” Bernie smiles a tad, “any day now, he’s suddenly going to grow a foot taller and you’re going to need to scramble to get him clothing, nearly overnight. Luckily Cam had his growth spurt in the summer months when school wasn’t in session.” She falls quiet a moment, knowing she wasn’t around for all of their teenage years, “Raising teenagers is...something.”

“Tell me about it. Elinor nearly killed a friend with an ectopic pregnancy as a teenager.” Serena chimes in, earning quizzical looks from the other two. She waves her hand in the air in an attempt to dissipate their attention, “Long story from my first year at Holby, we’ll save it for another day.”

“Good, because I want to hear it.” Fletch takes a swig of his beer, watching as a few other staffers take a seat in the small nook. “See? Party goes wherever I go.”
“Small miracles.” Bernie says under her breath, knowing things would become interesting at home because of her previous conversation with her wife.
Chapter 141

Chapter Summary

Serena tends to the grandchildren.

An unexpected guest arrives, but will they ruin an otherwise peaceful day?

Chapter Notes

Cole is growing like a weed.

If Guinevere is hard to understand, just let me know what you're curious about. She's modeled after my own at that age and usually I was the only one to understand her then.

I actually quite like writing these types of chapters, especially this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Guinevere, I’ll make your cheese toastie in just a moment. If you’d like a few more carrots, go ahead.” Serena moves to the entry door when she hears a gentle knock. Whoever it was didn’t even bother to use the bell and, honestly, she hardly even heard it. She tugs the front door open, standing a bit straighter when she comes face to face with the woman in front of her. “Mrs. Hero.” She isn’t sure how she should feel in this instance, “How did find my address?” Serena continues to block the doorway out of instinct.
“It wasn’t difficult, Ms. Campbell.” Irene Hero shakes her head a little, a sad smile at her mouth. “Does...does Charlotte Wolfe still live here?”

“Yes, but I’m afraid she’s at an appointment currently.” Serena studies the woman, taking note of the obvious bruising that’s being covered by makeup on her cheek. She swallows, finally stepping aside, “I’m...watching the grandchildren, so...I can get you some tea if you wait in the lounge for a moment.” Serena motions with her hand toward the room.

“As long as it isn’t too much trouble.” The woman steps through the doorway, walking into the lounge as the other woman returns to her kitchen. She takes in the large family portrait above the mantle, Christmastime. She can tell it isn’t recent, Serena Campbell is a brunette. Aside from Charlotte and her parents, two other young men and a young woman round out the photo.

Serena moves back into the kitchen, her body freezing a bit. What could she possibly want? She thinks for a moment, should I phone someone? Who could she phone? Bernie? Charlotte? She isn’t really sure. Serena swallows, lifting her head to see Guinevere is sneaking her salad dressing dipped carrots to Cole. “Gwennie, no.” She steps over to them, moving the few carrots from the tray of the high chair.

“Nan, sammy.” Guinevere tries to explain. When her grandmother gives her a confused look, she tries to motion with her hands, pretending to eat a sandwich. “Mine tummy wumby.”

Of course, Serena can’t help except smile. She leans down, pressing a kiss to the girl’s hair. “Of course. Your cheese toasty. I haven’t forgotten.” She shakes her head, giving Cole another once over, he’s sucking the apple salad dressing from his fingers. It doesn’t look like he got very far with the carrots, only having a few teeth himself. He’s mostly licked the dressing off and sucked on the pieces he was given. That’s the last thing she needs, for him to choke on a food he shouldn’t be having just yet anyway. Turning around, she notices Irene Hero standing there.

“It seems you’re quite busy and I’ve come unannounced, I apologize. Is there anything I can do to help?” Irene offers, giving a quick glance to the children around the table. They were quite young. She gives a kind wave toward them.

Cole, having been quite clingy as of late, pouts dramatically. He holds his salad dressing covered hands out toward Serena, not being one to like anyone new anymore. “Na.” His voice raspy, as it often is.

Serena sighs a little, using a wet washcloth to at least wipe off his hands before lifting him from the chair. “No, I’ve...I just need to make Gwen’s toastie and heat up Cole’s ravioli-”
“Let me. I can help.” Irene tries again, swallowing.

Glancing to Cole in her arms, it’s obvious he isn’t about to let her go. Serena sighs, “if you want to put the kettle on for tea...”

Irene flashes a quick smirk. She slowly removes her jacket, being careful of her own shoulder. She tries not to draw attention to her wince or how she’s not using her left arm. Sliding her left hand into her trouser pocket to keep it out of the way. She places the jacket on the corner of a chair at the table. She stays quiet as she moves to the stove and sink.

Serena closes her eyes a moment, inhaling deeply, then exhaling. “Mrs. Hero-”

“Please, it’s Irene.” The woman responds, her thick hair curled over her shoulders. She usually put it up in a small beehive type fashion, but hasn’t been able to.

“Okay, Irene.” Serena watches her, “How long has your shoulder been dislocated?” She remembers the woman’s days within AAU not terribly long ago.

Irene falls silent, turning the stove on in order to boil the water. She knows she needs to change the subject, “I...saw Charlotte’s photograph on the television after that...attack.” She pauses again, her husband didn’t want to see it. He’d yell any time she tried to watch. “I thought she might have...” Yes, of course it was over a month ago, but this is the first time she’s been able to leave the house without her husband. Under the guise that she was going to the beauty parlor, he knew how often she went and would only allow her to go when it was time for it.

“No, she was amazing that day.” Serena gives a gentle smile, speaking softly.

“Kalós.” Irene turns finally, lifting her eyes to meet the deep brown ones of the other woman. “You were with her.”

“We both were.” Serena tilts her head toward her grandson in her arm.

Irene nods again, tears were beginning to form in the corners of her eyes. “I’ll make the girl’s toastie.”
“I’d much prefer it if you had a seat. Charlotte’s old immobilizer is around here somewhere. I can reset your shoulder.” Serena sets Cole down, knowing he’s going to stay closer to her. She isn’t surprised when he holds onto her trouser leg. She motions to a seat at the table, not really caring what seat the woman would take.

“Wha’ you name?” Guinevere sits up, intrigued by this new person with the pretty, curled hair.

Deciding to follow the other woman’s instruction, Irene moves back to the table, slowing lowering herself into the same seat where her jacket is hanging. She glances to the young girl at the table, who is staring at her, waiting for an answer to her question, “I’m sorry, what did you ask?”

“My Gwennie.” Guinevere nods, noticing her grandmother walking back over to the fridge and stove area. “T’at Nan and Co.” She explains, turning her attention back to the other woman at the table, “Wha’ you name?”

Irene huffs a soft smile toward the girl, “I’m Irene. It’s...it’s very nice to meet you Gwennie.” Her accent not terribly thick, she tries to calm it a bit when she isn’t at home, speaking Greek fluently with her husband. “Is that short for Guinevere?” The girl nods and she offers a soft smile toward her. “You remind me of my elder daughter when she was very young.”

“Che big now?” Gwen stands on her chair, putting her hands up to show how tall the woman’s daughter might be.

“Guinevere, sit down, please.” Serena calls out to her, cooking, smirking as the girl follows her instructions. Glancing down to Cole, now sitting near her on the floor. On the inside of the kitchen island so that the new person couldn’t see him. Clever boy, she says to herself. She wonders if she should just give the small, soft ravioli to him as he sits there, but decides against it. Serena reaches up into a cupboard, pulling down the light blue, hand-painted teapot her mother had given her when the divorce from Edward was finalized. Matching cups and saucers as well. She hasn’t gotten to use it in years.

“Yes.” Truth is, Irene hasn’t seen her children in years. Aside from Achilles ‘Anders’ Hero before his death. His ashes had shown up at her door and she needed to hide them from her husband. She knew the man wouldn’t be happy that any part of their disrespectful children were in the house. “All three of them are...much older.”

“Tree?” Guinevere tilts her head to the side, still interested in this mundane conversation. She pauses,
glancing toward her grandmother, “Nan, I cowor?”

“Not yet. Your toastie is cooling. Should just be another minute or two.” Serena is rarely not amused by the girl. She reminds her of Elinor when she was young, loving every second of being an only child. She heats the premade, soft pasta in the microwave. Crouching to her grandson, “Cole, I need to put you in your chair.” When he starts to shake his head negatively, she continues, “are you hungry?” When Cole points to the freezer, she shakes her head, “after lunch you can have your frozen fruit. Pasta first.” When he gives his signature pout, she sighs, lifting him into her arms anyway. “Not going to work right now.” Serena finds herself mumbling to the boy, carrying the plate of cut up cheese toastie over to Guinevere.

“Are cheese toasties your favorite?” Irene smirks, watching as the girl grins when the food is placed in front of her.

Guinevere nods, humming approvingly. “Want some?”

“No, no. You enjoy that.” Irene chuckles a bit, “Ms. Campbell, is there a way I-”

“No, you’re a guest.” Serena pulls the tray out of the high chair, placing a still pouting Cole into the seat and securing him. He’s known to try and climb out when he’s finished eating, and often covered head to toe with whatever he consumed. Serena places the tray back on top, tears developing in the corners of the babe’s eyes. She knows this is one of his manipulation tactics, which he uses often. She moves back towards the kitchen, hearing the boy beginning his low cry. He didn’t cry often, or hardly at all. It causes her to turn, glad the high chair was on wheels. She pulls it over to where she was about to sit. Quickly preparing the teapot, saucers, and cups onto a tray, as well as a handful of digestives, she carries it to the table.

“Your tea set is beautiful.” Irene is still very cautious not to use her obviously dislocated arm. She dreads going home, knowing he’s going to see she’s done nothing different with her hair. He wasn’t happy for her time spent in hospital months ago either, she paid for that.

“Thank you.” Serena gently strokes Cole’s leg in an effort to calm him as she pours their tea, only to receive a grabby hand towards her from the boy as he continues to cry. She moves his small bowl of ravioli to the table, carefully removing him from his seat to sit on her lap instead. “Better?”

Irene watches them closely, taking the tea from the tray. She doesn’t add anything to it, preferring the slightly bitter mixture of this obviously expensive tea. “The two of you are very close.”
Serena nods slowly, “We are.” Cole seems much happier being on her lap as he feeds himself the small ravioli. “He’s lived within these walls since he was born, has us all wrapped around his finger...and he knows it.” She reaches over to stroke a stray bit of hair from Guinevere’s face as the girl eats excitedly.

Smiling a little, Irene takes a sip of her tea. “Do you have a big family, Ms. Campbell?”

“So, actually it’s Mrs. Wolfe now, but...call me Serena.” She inhales slowly, exhaling just the same. Taking a moment before answering the question, “my family isn’t terribly large, but we’re comfortable.”

“Four children altogether?” When Serena seems almost guarded, Irene realizes she needs to clarify, “to portréto sto salóni.” She pauses, thinking a moment for the words, “Your lounge. The ah...portrait.”

“Oh, yes.” Serena nods slowly, “taken a few years ago and doesn’t include the grandchildren, but...I’m incredibly fond of it.” She decides not to go into why it’s one of her favorites.

“A very attractive family.”

Serena raises an impressed brow, “Thank you.”

“I take it two children come from your wife and two come from you, correct?” Honestly, Irene is mostly just curious. She wants to know about this family her grandson is obviously thriving in. She’s never had any reservations about gay families. Never needed to. Just be happy she’s letting you stay this long.

“Yes, I suppose so.” She offers a sad smile. “It’s a bit complicated, but it works for us.” Serena peers skeptically at the woman on the other side of the table. “Irene, what brought you round today?”

Irene shakes her head, slight tears in her eyes. “With my Achilles not here, I...I’ve grown curious.” She swallows, “I know he cared for his wife...and she him. I know...if things went differently and...” The woman pauses, thinking of how to properly formulate the words, “if it were a different world, if only I gave him more love, he wouldn’t have ended up like his father.” Another pause, “I worried that...Charlotte had died. That...to mikró agóri was left without a mother...and I needed to...”
“You ‘kay?” Guinevere tilts her head to the side, reaching across the table and patting her new friend’s hand, “Everyt’ing be ‘kay.”

She flashes the small girl a reassuring, closed mouth smile. Irene takes a moment to breathe before she continues speaking, “I needed to see for myself that he was safe...and taken care of.” The woman lifts her hand up, tucking her hair behind her ear, “not that I had any doubt. I couldn’t make a telephone call...not to ask something like that and definitely not around my husband.”

“I take it your husband doesn’t know about Cole...” Serena moves her hand from Guinevere’s hair to lift her teacup in her hand. She feels sorry for this woman, but she also fears how she could mess things up at home.

Irene shakes her head quickly, “I will protect him...no matter the cost.”

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters per posting day for the rest of this story since we're at the tail end of it. Hopefully things don't get too hectic for the next two weeks.
Chapter 142

Chapter Summary

Charlotte arrives home to find an unwanted guest.

Serena's act of kindness causes tension.

Bernie tries to quell her daughter's heated temper.

“Mum, you’re overreacting.” Charlotte begrudgingly allows her mother to help her up the stairs to the entry door to the house. She does her best to breathe clearly and hide her gasping, “I was only a little lightheaded and I accidentally fell asleep in Ms. Vickers office. My pack just needs charging.”

“I might be overreacting, but I’d prefer to air on the side of caution.” Bernie gives her daughter an unimpressed look, as she opens the door, still holding her daughter’s arm as a show of support, “Did you forget to charge it last night? Seems the battery life is shorter and shorter.”

“I haven’t the foggiest. May need to order another just to take along with me.” Char murmurs, glancing around. She hears a children’s movie playing on the television in the lounge and knows that the kids would be drawn to it. However, Serena doesn’t usually do that. Cameron does, but not Serena. The only reason she knows is because she can hear Guinevere’s dramatic, every-other-word version of Be Our Guest. Then a loud yelp from the kitchen area, she glances over to her mother.

“Okay.” Bernie whispers, seeing her daughter’s subtle nod, indicating she wanted her to go and investigate the sound. Slowly she steps do the doorway, seeing her wife standing behind another woman, rubbing her back a little.

“How does that feel, Irene?” Serena asks the slightly older woman, picking up the bag of ice from the kitchen table and gently holds it to the woman’s shoulder. She lifts her head, jumping slightly when she sees her wife standing there. “Hello, darling. I assume the meeting went well...”

“As well as can be expected. Especially when calling me in on my day off.” Bernie furrows her brow slightly, motioning to the woman in the chair, and seeing her wife’s subtle head shake. Rounding the table a bit more, she raises her eyebrow, “Well, Mrs. Hero, you’re the last person I’d expect to see in my home.”

Charlotte leans a hand against the doorway, watching the sight. She remembers not long ago, helping
Serena understood that the woman would never be a competition to her, and yet...here she was. She doesn’t know whether she should actually say anything. Choosing instead to observe the situation.

“It is a very lovely home, Ms. Wolfe.” Irene says quietly, intimidated instantly by the woman. Achilles’ wife was the spitting image of her mother, just a tad younger and with different hair. She swallows, “I’m pleased that...Achilles’ boy is happy here.”

“My boy.” Charlotte finally says, the voice isn’t exactly the same as Irene Hero remembers her having, she sounds as if she’s smoked cigarettes for some time. “Anders wanted nothing to do with him...and now he has a proper father who looks after him, coddles him when he’s poorly—”

“Charlotte.” Serena lifts a hand, signaling the young woman to calm down, “that’s enough.”

Char just stands there, dampened eyes. Again, she feels her mother’s hand on her arm, gently guiding her to a kitchen chair to sit. Her focus remains on the woman at the table. “I thought you said you didn’t—”

“I’ve decided to help Irene and...”

“I don’t get a say?” The young woman glances up to her stepmother, disappointment behind her eye. There so much she wants to say, but knows she couldn’t possibly. Not with this woman or her own parents here. She wants to go up to her room and just scream it out. Like she and Cameron used to do when they were younger.

Bringing the oxygen tank Charlotte uses at home around to her, offering her daughter the nasal cannula and tubing, “Char.” Bernie warns this time, sitting against the edge of the table, placing the oxygen onto her daughter, knowing she’s far too cross at the situation to pay attention.

“Why not just have her stay here then? Hell, I’ll even let her have my bed.” There a drip of sarcasm in Charlotte’s voice. She feels a nudge against her upper arm. “I thought it was the plight of a Hero wife, Irene. That’s what you kept saying...that’s when you said I wasn’t strong enough to endure. Don’t you remember?”

“And I stand by it.” Irene continues not to look toward the young woman.

“Okay, let’s have a chat in the garden.” Bernie quickly says to her wife and daughter, going to help
the young woman stand only to have her hands swatted away. She lifts her hands up in innocence as she makes her way over to the door, holding the door for the two women to enter the space before she closes it. “What the hell is going on?”

“I seem to remember you pissed and sobbing in your bed upstairs, worried that she’d push you out of Cole’s life.” Charlotte glares towards Serena, holding onto the handle of her oxygen tank, glad it’s on wheels. “I told you and her that I didn’t want that life for my son. I didn’t want Cole to know about a father who didn’t want him or a family who was too dangerous.”

“I’m aware.” Serena nods.

“How did she end up here?” Bernie tilts her head to the side, “out of the blue?”

“She said she was worried about Charlotte.” The silver haired woman licks her lips, glancing over to make eye contact with her stepdaughter. “Her arm was dislocated and you can see—”

“The caked foundation on her face, obviously used to cover bruising.” Bernie tilts her head back, inhaling deeply. She lowers her gaze as she exhales, “Char, I understand where you’re coming from. Everything Irene Hero has said to you in the past is...inexcusable. However, she’s been so used to that way of life that I doubt she knows much else.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte’s actually surprised by her mother’s words.

“I also understand Serena’s point of view. There’s no reason we can’t help this woman, even a little bit. We owe it to her, as women, to see that no man is able to harm her.” Bernie continues, “we aren’t tending to her fully, the next steps are of her choosing. Not to mention when Cole is older, if he were to find out that we pushed his father’s abused mother away, he’d probably be pretty disappointed.”

“My mother had a saying, something I’ve lived my life by even to this day.” Serena watches her stepdaughter, “In the end, you must do what you think is right.” She reaches a hand out, only to be turned away by the young woman, “I think this is one of those instances, Charlotte.”

“I don’t want them anywhere near Cole and you welcomed one of them into the house.” Charlotte attempts to explain, slowly backing away from them, “I don’t want to be involved...and I can’t deal with this right now.” She turns toward the door, slowly making her way back to it.
“Where are you going? We need to talk this through.” Bernie counters, calling after her daughter. She sighs when the girl walks off anyway. “She can be so infuriating at times.” Bernie mumbles, “I don’t know where she gets it.”

Serena does her best to not begin laughing at her wife. “Well apples don’t fall far from their trees, darling.”

Bernie runs a hand through her own hair, taking a moment before replying, “What is your...endgame here, Campbell?”

The woman starts to shake her head negatively, “there doesn’t need to be one. I can not...I will not sit idly by while a woman, any woman, is beaten. I don’t care who it is.” Serena explains, “I was...when she showed at the door...I was terrified. I didn’t know anything about what she could have wanted. However...she wanted for nothing. Just to see that Charlotte was well...and that if she wasn’t, Cole was tended to.” She pauses, “risking her own safety to do so.”

The blonde looks away, nodding a little. “She isn’t going to phone anyone like you want her to.” Bernie says quietly, “I’d doubt she’ll even go to the hotel.” She turns her head, meeting her wife’s eyes, “I know you want to help, I do as well, but...she isn’t going to go for either of them.” She moves closer to her wife, pressing a kiss to her lips before they return to the kitchen where Irene Hero is contained, hoping they haven’t disappointed Charlotte too much.
Chapter 143

Chapter Summary

Guinevere shares a special moment with her aunt.

Charlotte puts Serena's mind at ease after a moment of weakness.

Serena finally says what she's been holding back.

Chapter Notes

Again, Guinevere might be a bit difficult to understand here. If any help is needed, just let me know. I feel it's pretty easy to figure out though.

This happens the same day as the last couple chapters.

Charlotte stands in front of the mirror on her dressing table, staring at her own reflection. She carefully opens the top few buttons of her blouse, looking at the ugly scar underneath. It’s why she hasn’t been able to undress in front of Ryan. She’s gone out of her way to hide it from him. Combined with the need for an oxygen tube just adding icing to the cake. Turning her head, she hears an awkward knocking at her bedroom door. “Yes?”

“It me.”

A smirk begins to slowly spread across her face as she moves to the door, unlocking it before opening. Gwen and Cole stand there, holding hands. “And how did the two of you get up here?” Charlotte tilts her head, stepping aside to let them into her room as she carefully buttons up her blouse.

“No gate.” Gwen shakes her head, “I bwing Co.”

“Yes, thank you.” It amuses her, actually. Maybe this is what she needed. “Why did you come up here?” Charlotte helps Cole onto her bed when he tries to climb up, Guinevere seems to be in awe of the room as a whole, a place she’s never actually ventured before.

“You hab big woom.” Guinevere nods, “wots of...” She pauses, knowing the word, but not knowing
how to say it. Gwen points to one of the many pictures on the wall. “Dat me!” She begins to grin. “You hab me up der.”

“Of course I have you up there, you’re my Gwennie.” Charlotte nods, letting Cole hold onto her. It’s as if he knows his mother is unhappy, also it’s his naptime. “You and your parents and-”

“Unk Cam!” Gwen hears the woman’s hum of approval, “and Gwan and Nan. Dey kiss der.”

Char stands, moving over to her to see what she was talking about, “Yes, they’re kissing there.” She offers a soft smile, “that was on New Years. They had just broken me out of hospital and danced around the lounge until midnight.” Her eyes glassy at the memory, “both of them so happy...so in love. Still are, but...things were a bit different then.” It seems a lifetime ago now even though it hasn’t even been a year.

“Why?”

“Why, what?” Char returns to her place on the bed, turning on the television in her room.

“Why diffwent?” Gwen continues to move about the room, investigating the drawers in her aunt’s dressing table, before deciding to look at herself in the full length mirror on the back of the bedroom door. It doesn’t hold her attention very long though before she starts scaling the foot board of the bed.

“Well, it was before Cole was born. He was still safe and comfortable in my belly.” Charlotte licks her lips, safe being a good word. Can’t keep him nearly as safe now. She finds herself sniffing, “ho...um...how about you? Does your Mum ever tell you stories of when she was pregnant with you?”

Gwen squints her eyes a bit, focusing on her aunt, not really understanding the word, “When I was in you tummy too?”

“No, you weren’t in my tummy. You were in your mother’s tummy. Her womb...a spot right near the tummy.” Char can tell this conversation wasn’t going to go anywhere, but anything to keep the precocious girl at bay, “and then, one day, you decided to be born.”

“Oh.” Guinevere nods, “Daddy der...Mumma der.”
“Yes, I’m sure both of your parents were there.”

“Nan and Gwan.”

Charlotte shrugs a little, “I don’t know, love. Maybe.”

“Mumma hab book and dey hold me when I was baby.” Guinevere explains, acting as if she’s much older than her own age. “Now I big.”

“You’re very big.” Char grins a bit, chuckling to herself. This is actually exactly what she needed.

Gwen climbs to the other side of her aunt, reaching over to pat Cole on his belly, as she often does to show her affection toward him, and has ever since he was born. She offers her cousin a smile before turning her attention back toward her aunt. She taps the oxygen tube resting against her aunt’s cheek, “It hu’t?” She bites her lip, “It make ‘nake sound.”

“It does makes snake sounds.” Charlotte slowly removes the nasal cannula from her own face, offering it to her niece, “It doesn’t hurt. It’s just a tube to help me breathe. Do you want to try it on?” When the girl nods, she carefully sets it onto her face, offering her a soft smile after. “See? It blows air into my nose because it can be hard for me to inhale...breathe-in sometimes.”

“Mean you sick?”

“No, I’m not sick. I just...have difficulties sometimes. It’s a dis...it’s a disability.” She nearly chokes on her words, never actually saying them before. Charlotte feels tears filling her eyes, but knows she needs to keep it together while the kids are there with her.

Gwen removes the tubing, placing it back onto her aunt’s face, being very careful to do so. She tucks it behind the woman’s ears, offering a smile after. “Vewy pwetty.” The girl leans in, placing a soft kiss on her aunt’s nose. “You put ’parkles on it?”

“No yet.” Char glances over, noticing Cole has fallen asleep, watching his show on the television, “How about you stay on this side and we can watch some telly before nap? No singing though.” When the girl looks as if she’s about to protest, “we can all have a treat when we wake up.”
“Ice cweams?” Guinevere raises a hopeful eyebrow.

“Possibly.” Char pauses, hearing the frantic calls of her stepmother from the other side of the door. “Did you sneak off, Gwennie?” When she hears the obviously fake snoring sounds coming from the girl, Char sighs, climbing from her bed. She opens the door to her room, closing it to a crack behind her, seeing the tears in Serena’s eyes, though the woman is doing her best to ignore them, “Hey.”

“The children are missing.” Serena shakes her head, “have you...have you seen them?”

“They’re watching telly in my bed.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, realizing how much this has shaken up the woman. Moving closer to her, she carefully wraps her arms around Serena, just holding onto her. “It’s okay.” She says quietly, rubbing the woman’s back. They haven’t spoken much as of late, not really, not like they used to. She knows the woman’s tears are only slightly about the children, they’re more about something else, but she isn’t exactly sure of what.

Serena closes her eyes within the tender embrace, missing her camaraderie with Charlotte. She won’t tell her how afraid she is that the young woman will leave. Losing the children for a moment just struck something with her. It causes her to cry a bit harder, her own anxieties getting the better of her.

*This is about something else*, Char says to herself. She isn’t about to let the woman go unless she’s ready. “What can I do to help you?” When the other woman shakes her head negatively, Char continues, “We’ve hardly...barely spoken since I came home from hospital and that was over a month ago.”

“I worry about you without end.” Serena finally lifts her head, meeting Char's eyes. "Do you know that?" Seeing the slight nod from the young woman, "and I've...I don't recall if I ever properly thanked you for saving my life, but...I am. I'm incredibly thankful to you...for you."

A slight smile plays at the corner of Charlotte's lips, "Simple ABC. Airway, breathing, circulation. Mum taught me that when I was five...in the middle of our den." She shrugs, "not to mention I wouldn't dare let anything ever happen to you."

Serena doesn't think Elinor would have ever been so kind or loving, she doesn't know if Elinor was even capable of it after Adrienne died. "My darling girl." She lifts a hand, pushing hair from Charlotte's face. "I love you so much.” She’s never really been able to say those words to anyone other than Bernie or the grandchildren, sometimes Jason, and even then she doesn’t say it often. She had whispered it into Elinor’s ear before they disconnected the ventilator, before things changed
forever for her. The words were hard for her to formulate, as they’ve always been.

"I love you too." It wasn't something she said terribly often, never really hearing it much when she was young either. It wasn't that she didn't know her parents feelings for her, they were usually just too busy or altogether absent. Bernie has attempted to make up for it through the years, whereas Marcus always took it for granted. "I'd call you Mum too if it wouldn't cause too much confusion, you know."

It's hard to hear for her, but not unappreciated. Serena moves over to the door to Charlotte's room and gently pushing it open. She sees the two babes on the bed, Guinevere comfortably holding onto Cole, now actually asleep. “You should take a picture of that. They won’t stay small forever.”

“Well, Gwen wouldn’t stop talking. You know how she gets.” Char slips behind Serena, moving around the room. She can feel herself growing a bit short of breath and casually places the nasal cannula onto her face, also lifting her mobile from the side table. She takes a few shots, smiling a little before sending them to her parents with the caption, *for when they're teenagers.*
Chapter 144

Chapter Summary

Annette Vickers gets the low down on what happened to her patients' guest.

Charlotte reveals something she feels guilty about, but should she really?

Chapter Notes

About a week after the last chapter.

Annette Vickers leans back in her comfortable chair, feet curled under herself, “cocoa okay?”

“Salted caramel hot cocoa is never a bad thing. It’s lovely, thank you.” Charlotte nods a little, sitting tailor style in on the comfortable sofa. This office has grown so comfortable to her, it felt abnormal for her therapist to make her home visits while Char was still feeling poorly.

“I thought you would. That’s why I picked it up.” Annette hums a soft sound of amusement, “So, what happened with your ex’s mother?” She tilts her head to the side, “in a session with another patient who need not be named, the instance was hinted at, but not gone into. I thought it was better to go into it with you.”

This was commonplace by now. Without identifying the patient exactly, that being Serena, Char knew who she was speaking of. She nods a little, “Uh...Serena wanted to help her. Get her away from her husband. I felt very...betrayed, but I know I was being selfish at the time, protective of my own feelings on the woman.”

“Did she do something before?”

“She had told me that I wasn’t brave enough to be a Hero wife...and it always kind of stuck with me.” Char doesn’t really look toward her therapist, glancing anywhere else just to formulate her thoughts and words. “When she said it, she was poorly and...found out Anders had just died and...I was so offended by the statement.” Her tone is calm and insightful, “In hindsight, I...I suppose she was right. I wasn’t brave enough...because I shouldn’t need to be brave to be another person’s partner.”
A smile begins to creep across Annette’s face, “You’re absolutely correct.”

“Serena gave her money for a hotel and told her to get in touch the morning after.” Charlotte continues, “but my mother tailed her after she left the house...wanted to see if she really did head to a hotel.” She shrugs, a slight amused smirk playing at the corner of her mouth, “Mum knew she wouldn’t, and she was right. I’m glad, though, that Mum did all of that because now we know where these people live.”

“What do you suppose was the reason for her visit?”

“Oh, I think she was telling the truth about that.” Char nods, “wanted to see if I was dead...and wanted to know if Cole was tended to if I was.”

Annette raises an eyebrow, “that’s being rather blunt.”

“Well, it’s true.” She absently stirs the spoon around in her mug, shrugging slightly. “I think she wants to play a role in Cole’s upbringing. However, I...I don’t know if I want that.” Charlotte takes another sip of her cocoa, “Anders...made it clear he didn’t want anything to do with Cole. He’d let me talk about him because he just...wanted to hear my voice toward the end, but...” She shakes her head a little, “he didn’t want anything to do with him.”

“His actions, however, should not be...indicative of his mother’s emotions. For a moment, think about this from her perspective.” Annette adjusts her position in her seat, “Anders was her only son, correct?” Upon the nod from her patient, she continues, “she loses her only son and, around the same time, discovers the existence of his only child. The love from a mother, as I’m sure you feel as well, never stops. Regardless of the events that happened throughout their lives.”

“She had pushed he and his sisters away because of their father.”

“That was her roundabout way of protecting them.” Annette offers a reassuring smile, “just as you’re wanting to keep her and that family away from Cole, to protect him.”

“If she were to leave the husband...finally be rid of him, I’d...I think I’d be okay with...”
“No, you wouldn’t.” The therapist answers softly, “and that’s okay. I understand your reservations.”

“I don’t...want him learning about them, or Anders. I don’t want him to know about any of it.” Charlotte tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, “and seeing as how Ryan just...has dived in head first with being a father, I don’t see any reason to ever inform him of his true paternity.”

“You have plenty of time to decide that.” Annette shakes her head, “speaking of Ryan, how has that been going for you?”

“He’s mentioned...a new place. Somewhere for us to actually be a family together, but...I don’t think I’m ready for that. Not really. I don’t think I’m prepared to...” Charlotte feels tears forming in her eyes, but she isn’t exactly certain why they’re forming, “be alone again.”

“You wouldn’t be alone though.” The therapist takes a sip of her drink, “you’ll have Cole and Ryan there.”

“I-I don’t do well when I’m alone. At home there’s...almost always someone there.” She looks away, “and my Mum...both of them, they’re so...” Char starts to pull her knees up, “they understand.”

“It’s okay, Charlotte. No one is forcing you to go anywhere. Let’s not regress.” Annette keeps her calm tone, moving around to the sofa to sit next to the young woman. She carefully wraps an arm around her, never actually being so close with a patient before. Charlotte Wolfe was, by far, one of her most interesting, as well as taxing, cases. “You have plenty of time to work on the logistics with Ryan.”

“I’ve tried to tell him to go. To...to be with literally anyone else.”

“But he loves you...and you love him. He’d do anything to make you happy.” Annette continues to hold onto the young woman, “not to mention you’ve already said you plan to just allow Cole to think of Ryan as his biological father. So, we need to find a way for you to...understand that you’re worthy and deserving of true love and devotion without abuse.”

“I’m the one that has abused him though. I’ve...thrown things at him, screamed, scratched...” Charlotte answers quietly, “I’m the bad guy here.”

“No, you’re damaged, but not irreparable.” Her tone caring, honest. Annette meets her patient’s eyes
when the young woman glances over toward her. “Which is totally fine. We’re all a bit damaged, some more than others. The desire to better oneself is what counts...and I know you want to do that. Even with a steep incline, you’re ready to brave that mountain.”

“I don’t feel like I am though.” Char leans her head over to lean against her therapist. Their relationship was unconventional between a doctor and a patient, however it worked for them. Aside from her parents, and possibly her boyfriend, Char just doesn’t trust anyone as much as she does her therapist. “Whenever things begin to look up, I get knocked down to the beginning. I thought...when I was pregnant, I thought another baby would help me move on...with Ryan, with...my life. New beginnings and all that. Then I had a miscarriage...without even being aware of it. The...the dreams of the people...screaming and dying all around me...are upsetting, but...” She swallows, her face softening with a sad smile, “I really did want that for our us...for our family.” She pauses, “and it was my fault that it happened.”

“Hardly.”

“It was, Vickers.” Char’s voice more quiet. She takes another sip from her cold cocoa, chocolate milk at this point.

“You weren’t far along, Char. Miscarriages before twelve weeks are often a sign of abnormalities in the fetus. Unfortunately, it just so happened to have occurred at the same time you were on the mend.” Annette shakes her head, “You know that. You’re a brilliant young woman who never gives herself enough credit. You didn’t cause your miscarriage, no one did.”

“Doesn’t stop me from feeling like I did.”

“And that’s understandable, but the facts outweigh the feelings.”

Charlotte inhales slowly, giving a glance to her oxygen pack near her. She decides to ignore the voice in the back of her head that’s telling her to put it on. She looks forward, “it will get better, right? It needs to get better.”

Annette reaches over to tuck a piece of hair behind the young woman’s ear, offering her a reassuring smile, “Of course. We’ll work on it together.”
Chapter 145

Chapter Summary

Ryan and Serena share their first drinks.

After becoming properly intoxicated, Ryan reveals his surprise for Charlotte to Serena.

“You know, Madam Director, I think this is the first time I’ve ever had a drink with you.” Ryan offers his glass toward the woman to clink hers against. “And I think we’ve made quite a...quite a dent.” He hums a soft chortle, his words slurring ever so slightly. “Char couldn’t...keep up.” He motions with a wave of his other hand toward his sleeping fiance, curled up on the loveseat.

Serena raises an eyebrow, clinking her stemless wine glass against his glass of scotch. “First time for everything, Mr. Anand. However, if you’re going to be a part of this family, at least call me Serena.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

She snorts through a giggle, polishing off her second bottle of shiraz into her glass. “Why do you...want that baggage?” Bernie had taken Cole up to bed hours prior, having an earlier shift on Keller the next day. “Like...I get love, but that’s so...that only goes so far, doesn’t it?”

“If Bernie were in her same predicament, would you cut your losses and run away?” Ryan sips down the rest of his scotch, leaning forward to obtain the glass bottle from the coffee table and pour himself a bit more, “or would you stay by her side?”

“She has moments.” Serena nods slowly, watching the red wine swirl around her glass, “but she’s gotten very good at downplaying the things that bother her. Sudden loud noises, screaming, all that stuff on the telly after the attack, it really bothered her. She said it was because of us, but I don’t think it was.”

Ryan nods slowly, only knowing Charlotte’s side of her mother’s time in the service. “She probably saw some mad shite.”

“Puts it mildly, I reckon.”
“I want to keep those thoughts to a minimum,” Ryan leans back on the sofa, “the one thing I worry about most is that Char feels comfortable in our house-”

“Why do you want that right now?” Serena shakes her head, her feet curled up under her from her place on the sofa, “she’s only just started to act like herself again, not to mention all of her mental and medical issues she’s...” The woman fades off, glancing over toward him, “Cole sleeps with Bernie and I every night.” Her words slur slightly as well, neither one of these people are hurting in the least.

“And he can keep sleeping with you.” He shakes his head, noticing her confused look, “What?”

“You bought a house,” Serena watches him closely, “and it’s in this neighborhood?”

“So close you can touch it through the window.” Ryan places his short glass onto the coffee table, shakily standing and offering his hand toward the woman to help her up, “want to see?”

“Have you showed it to Charlotte?” She chugs the remainder of her glass, earning an impressed glance from the young man in front of her. Serena smiles to him before taking his hand, placing her glass onto the coffee table as well. “You know she doesn’t like change.”

“I’m aware.” Ryan nods, a sly smirk spreading across his face, “that stubborn streak drives me wild.”

“I have the same problem with her mother.” Serena holds onto the man’s arm as he guides them both, stumbling along. When he opens the front door, she closes it behind them. “I didn’t know anything was on the market around here.”

“Well...depends.” He finds himself mumbling, “I make sure she has whatever she wants. She’s my world. You know that?” They slowly walk together in the cool night, Ryan smiles a little, “You know, Serena, you’re actually quite beautiful when you aren’t busy being so cross with everyone.”

“I think there was a compliment in there somewhere.”

“Well, it is. Char is incredibly lucky to have two talented, intelligent, beautiful mothers.” Ryan finally stops in front of the house directly next door. He motions his arm toward it, “ta-dah.” He’s taken aback slightly when he receives an excited kiss on his lips from the woman next to him. It causes him
to just stand there, looking at her as she stares up at the house. “Good?”

“You’re having me on.” Serena shakes her head a little, “This is Mr. Smith’s home. He’s lived here long before.”

“Moved in with his daughter about a year ago. His children tend to him and were going to rent the house out, but...I made them an offer they couldn’t refuse.” His slurring is getting a bit worse, but he does his best not to acknowledge it, “Are you that oblivious to who lives around you, Serena?”

“Well...we were a tad busy about a year ago.” Serena tilts her head from side to side, “do you have the key?”

“Don’t need it.” Ryan escorts her up to the door, opening it dramatically. It had been left unlocked. “See? I’ve been here for...a fortnight or so now.”

“And we didn’t know?”

“I’ve parked my car round the corner. Hired people to...set things up while I was at work or spending time with Char.” Ryan offers, “I’d watch interior design telly with her in order to figure out her likes and dislikes. Realized she’s into vintage appearing things that kind of look like they’re from the fifties...I was more than happy to make it all happen for her. I just hope she...likes it even a little.”

Serena looks around, in awe really. *Mid-century modern*, she says to herself. Colorful, but somehow it all works. “Set up like mine...”

“Five bedroom...kitchen is a bit different. State of the art appliances. She loves to cook.” Ryan explains, following the woman as she moves throughout the ground floor, “do you think she’ll like it?”

“Like it? Bloody hell, I think she’ll love it, Ryan.” Serena nods, her eyes ever so slightly teary as she stands in the lounge, genuinely happy for the young woman, “but if she doesn’t...what are your plans?”

He huffs a soft laugh to himself, “I don’t know.” Ryan glances around, “if she wants to stay with you, that’s her choice. As long as she knows she has a home here as well...that’s all I want. Not to mention, if Cole still wants to keep sleeping with you and the Major.”
Serena slowly folds her arms over her chest, “you aren’t going to force him to stay here?”

“I’m not going to force anyone into anything.” Ryan shakes his head, “that’s not what I’m about. My main prerogative is that one day, maybe, we’ll be able to all live under the same roof as a family. Charlotte Wolfe is my queen. I’d give her the world if that’s what she wanted. Cole...that’s my son. Mine. I’ll do whatever I possibly can to make him happy. If it’s him continuing to sleep with you and Bernie...then that’s that. I honestly don’t care.” A smile plays at his lips, “Kind of funny actually.”

She’s never doubted his feelings toward Charlotte or Cole, but she’s never heard him fully vocalize them either. Alcohol brings out the truth for people, “Funny?” She begins to climb the stairs, holding onto the side rail as to not fall down them, hearing his footsteps behind her as he follows.

“The two of you intimidating people left and right by day, soft and cuddling an innocent wee boy by night.” Ryan nods, “when Char brings him round the hospital, I know you two give everything up for him. Just to hold him for a few moments. He adores you both and it’s obvious the two of you adore him as well.”

“I do.” Serena nods, knowing where the master bedroom would be with an en suite bath like her own house, “So the whole...motief goes through the house?” Change the subject, best way to stop talking about her personal feelings.

Ryan hums his approval, motioning the bed, “have a lie down. Mattress with no springs...and made of this...rubbery stuff. It’s odd, but...you’ll see.” When the older woman gives him an unsure look, he motions to the bed again, “Go on.”

Carefully crawling onto the bed, she lies down, “Blimey...you’re right.” Serena curls up on her side, her muscle tension seeming to relax with little effort.

“I know it.” He leaps onto it, earning a hearty giggle from the woman next to him. “You’re easy to get into bed.” Ryan grins broadly, the pair’s laughter becoming louder. He starts to yawn, “are you hungry? I might have some...crisps or...cake or something.”

“I’d love a bit of cake, but...I don’t want to get up either.” Her eyelids feel so heavy at this point. The stress of the day catching up with her.

"I'll bring it up here." Ryan smirks, amused that the Medical Director is not only drunk, but on his
mattress at the moment. Not that they would do anything together, or even want to, but it causes him to laugh to himself. He starts to get up, slurring his words, "beautiful woman in my bed and she's making me get her a slice of cake."

"On the double." Serena hums a languid giggle, watching the man, "I should let Bernie know where I am."

"I got it." Ryan removes his mobile from his pocket, squinting his eyes a bit to touch a face he thinks is Bernie Wolfe and sends a cryptic, *WE R NEXT DOOR*, to the woman as he leaves the bedroom, on his way to the kitchen.
Chapter 146

Chapter Summary

Bernie awakens to a nearly empty bed.

Charlotte and her mother find their partners in a compromising position.

Chapter Notes

Morning after last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bernie reaches her hand behind herself when the alarm on the mobile begins to sound. She’s let herself sleep in a bit. Opening her eyes a little, she realizes the empty space on her wife’s side of the bed. She furrows her brow, even when Serena has had a bit too much to drink, she always finds her way up to bed. She begins to pull away from Cole’s sleeping form curled up against her.

“Gam, no.” Cole holds onto her shirt, “No, Gam.” He offers her his best pouty face.

She snorts, giving the boy a squeeze, “It’s time for Gran to get up for work, but...we need to go find where Nan has gotten off to.” Bernie strokes his hair a little as he continues to rub his face against her, “do you want to go and find Nan with me?”

“Nan?”

Bernie hums her affirmation. “Let’s get your nappy changed and then we’ll go search her out.” She reaches over to her bedside table for the small stack of nappies and wipes, making short work and carrying the soiled diaper with her to place into the bin, as she does every morning. She glances back to the boy, seeing his reaching arms. “Why can’t you walk?”

“Gam.” Cole pathetically pouts again, then grins broadly when Bernie lifts him into her arms. He places his head against her shoulder, holding onto her.

She sighs heavily, carrying the babe with her to hallway. Peeking into her daughter’s bedroom
through the cracked door, she notices the empty bed. That wasn’t really uncommon, though. Often, Charlotte would awaken early, get coffee started. Sometimes she’d make a spot of breakfast. Bernie has gotten a bit spoiled by it. Descending the stairs, she stands in the doorway to the lounge, seeing her sleeping daughter curled up in the corner of the loveseat. Sleeping later than usual, not that it actually mattered, but it was interesting to her. “Char.” She nudes the young woman gently with her knee, sighing when she doesn’t respond right away.

“Mum.” Cole calls, giggling when the young woman opens her eyes wide, looking around for him.

Charlotte slowly glances up towards her mother standing next to her. “Morning.” She squints from the sunlight illuminating the room, “is it always this bright in here?”

“In the lounge? Yes.” Bernie shakes her head, “I see two empty glasses on the table and our significant others are missing.”

“Maybe they went out for breakfast.” She yawns a little, honestly quite comfortable in her corner of the sofa.

“Charlotte-”

“Mum, I have no idea where they’ve gotten off to. As you can probably tell, I am just now waking up myself and was not on duty to supervise them.” Charlotte slowly pushes herself up to sitting, “have you tried phoning Serena?”

“No.” Bernie sighs, “I left my mobile upstairs.”

Charlotte reaches for hers on the coffee table, bleary eyed. She unlocks it with her fingerprint before handing it to her mother, “I can’t see a thing yet.”

Bernie rolls her eyes a little, “maybe it’s time for an eye exam?” Seeing the notification for a text message, she opens it. “We are next door. Message from Ryan.” She shakes her head a little, “Any idea?”

“Let’s go meet the neighbors.” Standing from her place on the sofa, Char leads her way to the entry, zippering up her comfortable sweatshirt hoodie a little. “I know there’s been someone moving things into the place over there. Maybe they’ve...I don’t know. I have no idea when they left or where they
went, Mum.” Char reaches into her purse, obtaining her sunglasses to slide onto her face. Much better.

“Let’s try there then.” Bernie shakes her head, looking to Cole in her arms. She pulls on Serena’s overcoat, knowing it’s a bit larger than her own, in order to accommodate her grandson wrapped within. “Okay, I think that’s...sufficient.”

“Nan coat.” Cole gives a knowing nod, able to smell the woman in the fabric. “Gam?”

“Yes, it’s Nan’s overcoat.”

“Nan cold?”

“I don’t know, Cole. Let’s find out together, shall we?” Bernie shakes her head a little, amused with the boy. She follows behind her daughter as they venture from the house, seeing the seemingly uninhabited house next door that she’s being led to. “So, what is our end goal here?”

“You’re the one looking for them, Mum.” Char glances over toward the woman. “What if they’re having an affair and we find them in bed together?” A sense of mirth within her voice, “that was always his plan from the start, to nick your girl out from under you.”

“Young, passionate, handsome...that is her type.” Bernie smirks, thinking of the story Serena had told her about going to a party with Ric years ago and being hit on by a young student who had read her research reports. “Definitely not brilliant, middle aged lesbian.” She pauses, looking between them, “we look like a couple of nutters.”

“We are a couple of nutters.” She raises an eyebrow, noticing the front door cracked open when she finally approaches it. “Odd.”

Bernie raises an eyebrow, pushing the door open anyway. She inhales, mumbling, “Fresh coat of paint.” Slowly stepping into the vestibule of the house, Bernie glances around for an answer. Any answer.

“And...beautiful.” Charlotte starts to smile a little, glancing around after following behind her mother into the house, “this furniture is...exactly what I would choose.” Stepping into the lounge a bit more, she sees a single photograph of herself with Ryan and Cole. “Ryan.” She whispers to herself, leaving
the lounge quickly, passing her mother as she starts jogging up the stairs.

“Charlotte.” Bernie whispers in warning before following her daughter. If Charlotte was going to get in trouble for trespassing, she will too, “Char, this isn’t—”

“Except I know who lives here.” Char silently reaches the stairs, knowing exactly where each room would be. She moves to the open doorway of the master suite, smirking a little at the sight before her, “Well, you were right.” She whispers to her mother, doing her best not to laugh at the sight before her.

Bernie moves to stand next to her daughter, taking in the sight of Ryan holding Serena in bed, the woman’s head on his bare chest, lying sideways, a discarded dish with crumbs of cake not far from them. She does her best not to laugh at the pair. “Let’s hope this is the house that Ryan purchased.” Her voice low, tilting her head to the side as she studies them, “how pissed do you think they were last night?”

“Enough.” Charlotte slowly folds her arms over her chest.

“Nan ‘leep.” Cole does his best whisper, which actually isn’t that good at all. He smiles when his Gran hums approvingly.

Serena hears someone else in the room, actually quite comfortable. She moans a little, her head pounding from an obvious hangover. Opening her eyes a little, she realizes she’s being watched. The mother and daughter duo not far from her. She closes her eyes again, inhaling deeply only to realize this isn’t Bernie. Serena pulls her head back quickly, seeing the nude, tan chest of her stepdaughter’s fiance. “Bloody hell.”

The sudden jolt causes Ryan to open his eyes as well, looking to the woman next to him, “What?” He backs away quickly, obviously confused. It doesn’t help when he sees his fiance in the doorway, with her mother.

“I’m guessing you both slept well.” Bernie looks between the two, “looked that way at least.”

Char tilts her head to the side, “I knew you wanted to bond with my family, but sleeping with my stepmother—”
Ryan shakes his head a little, alarmed, stuttering as he attempts to process, “I...I can explain...”

“I don’t want you to.” She starts to laugh a bit, “I’m having a bit too much fun with this.”

“I...” He starts to look around the room, realizing they were in the new house, “I...bought a house.”

“I see.” Charlotte nods, letting the room go silent for a moment before allowing a smile to creep across her face, “I kind of love it.”

“Truly?” Ryan actually was worried, only remembering bits and pieces from the night prior, “I wanted it to be perfect for you.” He starts to stand, slowly moving over to her, “Everything fresh...except for the cappuccino maker in the kitchen. I did keep that.”

“The photo in the lounge gave you up, Mr. Anand.” Char leans in, kissing him tenderly as she absently runs her fingers through his thick, black hair.

Serena’s face softens a bit, loving to see people in love. It always does something to her. She glances back to her wife, “you’re wearing my overcoat.” She motions to the bed, “come and tell me this isn’t the most comfortable thing you’ve ever-”

“We just purchased a new bed a few years ago. We don’t need a new one.” Bernie starts to open the buttons of the coat, letting her grandson out to hug onto his Nan. She does as her wife requested, however, moving over to the bed to lie back on it. “You’re right.”

“I know.” Serena nods slowly, hugging onto her grandson before he climbs past her, trying to jump on the bed. He isn’t terribly successful, but it does amuse her greatly though. She raises an eyebrow, watching as her wife playfully pulls the boy down, hearing his raspy belly laugh. She does wince by the loud noises they’re making, “I think I need a couple paracetamol tablets.”

“Alright. Let’s head out then.” Bernie doesn’t move though, groaning, “I don’t want to get up.” She closes her eyes, feeling as her grandson climbs on her, laying on top of her and nuzzling his face in the crook of her neck. “No, no. We need to get up and get something to eat.”

Clearing her throat, Char stands in the doorway still, looking to her parents. “Breakfast at the other house...then,” She glances back to her fiance, “we can come back here and you can...show me around?”
“I’d be happy to.” Ryan raises an eyebrow, his hair akimbo. He pauses a moment, looking down at himself, “I should put a shirt on.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Charlotte playfully nudges his arm.

“What about cake and cappuccino downstairs?” Ryan offers instead, “I have eggs and bread as well.” He shrugs, “I’m a wiz with the cappuccino machine.”

“That sounds delightful, actually.” Serena nods, “what about paracetamol tablets?”

“I reckon we both require them.” The young man nods, offering her a hand to help her up from the bed, which she willingly accepts. Ryan chuckles a little, realizing Bernie seems to be falling back to sleep, “I’ll get you two a bed just like this one. Best nights’ sleep I’ve ever had.”

“It can be my daughter’s dowry.” Bernie mumbles sarcastically, begrudgingly pushing herself to sit up, holding onto her grandson as she does so, “it’s quite a bargain.” She begins to smirk when she sees her daughter roll her eyes, “were you a barista, Mr. Anand?”

“Possibly in a past life.” Ryan leads them from the room, “you know what will be nice? Being able to park in front of my own home finally.”

“You could have told me sooner, so that’s all on you.” Char shakes her head, absently taking hold of her stepmother’s arm as they make their way through the house. “I’ll just...be glad to get rid of the other one. It’s been far too long and the place is just...needlessly sitting there, uninhabited.”

Ryan doesn’t bring up that she changed her mind about going there again, he could tell it scared her. He also knows that there’s still many of her things at that house. “Not to mention this house still needs your...touch, so to speak.” Maybe he’ll bring it up later, once they’re alone. He knows he’ll need to.

Chapter End Notes

*Also, question...*

Shall we do 2 chapters on Wednesday and 2 on Saturday to finish up and start with the
new story the week after?

OR

Should we do 3 chapters on Wednesday and 1 on Saturday to finish and post the first chapter of the next story immediately the same day?
Chapter 147

Chapter Summary

Charlotte and Ryan hold a dinner to reveal a secret they’ve been keeping.

Gwen makes a demand of the seating chart.

Chapter Notes

Week and a half after last chapter.

“We could have just gone out somewhere. That new, high end place that opened by the hospital. Instead of you worrying that everything will look perfect here.” Ryan shakes his head, “that’s why I insisted we go to inform my parents instead of inviting them to this—”

“Because your mother doesn’t like me and it was easier for her to run to her room when you told her you married me and deprived her of a perfect Pakistani wedding.” Charlotte smirks a little, amusing herself, “you’re supposed to be in the other room, entertaining.”

Ryan exhales heavily, rolling his eyes. “You’re never going to let that go.”

“And why should I?” She leans down, opening the oven door to remove the shepard’s pie that was baking within. “She said I ruined you.” Charlotte sounds amused by it all, “screamed that I ruined you, actually. My baby boy, no!” She begins to chuckle to herself, “would have thought I ran you over with my car. Wait until you tell her I had a miscarriage.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” He sighs, knowing the loss of her pregnancy affected her even though she wouldn’t admit it, “let’s...look past that, please.” Ryan shakes his head, moving closer to her and kissing the side of her shoulder, “my mother’s opinion of you doesn’t matter to me. My dad loves you. He had the biggest grin on his face. Then took Cole to the garden to play a bit of footy. Well, they pushed a ball back and forth at least.”

“I know, I know. It just...isn’t something I’ve ever needed to worry about before is all.”
“And you don’t need to worry about it now, okay?” Ryan shakes his head, turning away from her once she obliges him with a quick kiss. “I’ll call everyone in.”

Char stands still at the kitchen island, wishing they had just invited their parents to their civil ceremony. It was silly of them to run off in the way they did. She lifts her head when her family begins to enter the room, her niece quickly running over to her. “Gwennie, are you hungry?”

Guinevere gives her aunt a sideways glance, “Are there carrots?”

“Extra roasted carrots just for you. Made sure of it.” Charlotte winks, amused with the girl as she cheers, running over to tell her mother. She waits until everyone sits before she lifts her head, “While we invited you all to break out the new serving sets and the new dining table and the new chairs—”

“And the new kitchen. This place is lovely.” Serena beams, quite proud of her stepdaughter for how far she’s taken the house in just over a week’s time. “You’ve done so much.”

“Thanks, Stepmum.” Char carries over a few larger plates of the sides, motioning for Ryan to get the pie with only a few sides within it, having baked extra because of the group of people there. “Anyway, we invited you all here as a bit of a...celebration of sorts.”

“But we’ve already had Cole’s birthday party.” Jason furrows his brow, “is there something else to celebrate?”

“Yes, yes, there is.” The young woman slowly sinks to her seat, “Ryan and I got married.” She finally blurts before someone else can interrupt her. Charlotte nods, raising again to move back to the kitchen island to obtain her glass of wine, as well as the bottle to refill it. “We had turned our papers in a while ago and we wanted something...that was just us.”

“Congratulations.” Marcus leans forward, resting his forearms on the table, “saved me a fortune in wedding fees.” He clears his throat, his face displaying a sense of disappointment through he attempts to conceal it with a cordial smile, “is it what you wanted, Char?”

Charlotte nods quickly, “Ryan wanted something bigger, but I uh...I don’t do well with crowds, so—” She lifts a hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, “he obliged my request.”

“You keep saying that, but it never mattered how you were married to me, as long as we were
married with one another.” Ryan sets the pie onto the center of the large, round table. He presses a kiss to the top of his wife’s head. “Didn’t want her changing her mind on me so we played by her rules.” He teases a little, sitting on the opposite side of the table from his wife. They chose this table very specifically. There would never be any ‘head’ of the table. They were both equal partners.

“I keep saying it because it’s true.” Char mumbles, feeling a pat on her thigh. “Gwennie, don’t you want to sit down? I even bought you a booster to sit with everyone else.” When the girl shakes her head negatively, she continues, “Why not?”

“I sit with you.” Guinevere demands, nodding.

“How about you sit next to me?” Char offers, “I had your seat set up just a couple chairs away and we can ask your Dad and Uncle Cam to scoot.” When the toddler nods again, she lifts her head to glance toward her brother, who was sitting next to her. “Chop chop, Uncle Cammy. Tell him.”

“P’ease?” Gwen glances up to the man.

“I’m going, I’m going.” Cam sighs, “You’re impossible to deny, Gwen.” He leans down, speaking with Jason quietly in his ear for them to shift around, giving the toddler what she wants. “Happy?”

“My am.” Gwen allows her aunt to secure her into the booster seat, a new broad grin on her face.

Charlotte hums a soft chuckle, watching as everyone begins to dig into the food on the table. It dawns on her after a few moments that her mother has remained completely silent, as has her stepmother. She glances over to Serena on her other side, her son seated between his grandmothers, then back to her own plate. The room is relatively silent with exception to soft taps of forks and knives against dishes. “Someone, please, say something.”

“Such as?” Bernie mumbles, reaching out to obtain the wine glass she has been sipping from since she arrived. Since this morning, something tingled in the back of her head. Now she knows why.

“It is commonly thought that the honey bee is a natural abnormality and shouldn’t be able to fly because of its body mass.” Greta offers quietly, just wanting to break the silence. She’s grown far more comfortable around this family through the years, though she does wish she was a bit closer to Bernie’s children, she really is unable to complain much. “It’s untrue...because the original scientists believed the bees flew like aeroplanes instead of...not like that.” She swallows when Charlotte abruptly stands from the table, moving away from the room. “She asked that someone say
“something, was what I said wrong?”

“No, of course not, Greta.” Serena shakes her head, offering a gentle, reassuring smile.

Ryan stands, “I should—”

“No, let her be.” Bernie shakes her head, folding the cloth napkin she had placed in her lap and setting it next to her dinner plate. She finishes her glass of wine before standing, “She’s pissy with me. I’ll go and speak with her.”

“With that attitude?” Serena glances up towards her wife, “is that the best idea?” She knows she isn’t going to be able to stop the woman and watches as she follows behind her daughter anyway. The room falls silent again. Serena closing her eyes to inhale and exhale slowly. She takes a moment to open her eyes and glance around the table before speaking again, “let’s eat while they sort things?”

Cameron lifts the fork to his mouth again, his food a quarter eaten, “I wasn’t aware we were waiting.”

Marcus chuckles a little, amused with his son. He looks over to Ryan next to him, who has since returned to his seat, “second guessing that marriage, yet?”

“After all we’ve been through?” Ryan shakes his head slowly, a smile creeping across his face, “not a chance.”
Chapter 148

Chapter Summary

Bernie follows her daughter after the younger woman’s sudden departure.

Ryan manages to get through to his wife.

Bernie tells Ryan what she really feels about the marriage.

Chapter Notes

Immediately after last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlotte shands in one of the empty rooms of her house, standing awkwardly in the center, facing the wall. Her arms wrapped around herself. She doesn’t know why she’s having such a hard time with this. Char didn’t care about Ryan’s mother’s reaction. She expected that. She could live with that. However, the lack of her mother’s reaction pained her. She turns her head to the side when she feels like she’s being watched. “I made food for you. Go and eat it, please.”

“I’ll do what I want, thank you.” Bernie focuses on her daughter, slowly folding her arms over her chest. She swallows, “you know I’m not a fan of confrontation, but you like to...hash things over as quickly as possible, so here I am.”

“Why can’t you be happy for me?” She turns slowly to face her mother, her eyes are flooded with tears though she does her best not to allow their falling. Char doesn’t look to her mother, “all of this...all of this has been so hard for me. Do you know that? Moving here and heeding your advice...trying to just...” She shakes her head a little.

“No one has made you do anything, Charlotte.”

“All Ryan has ever done is love me and...he bought this house to make it easier for us to live as a family here because...he knew how close we are. He knows how close Cole is with you and Stepmum.” A tear finally escapes the confines of her eye, “and I love this house...and I love him.”

“So...why does it sound like you’re trying to convince yourself of that?” Bernie asks cautiously,
taking a step closer, “if you need to stay over our house, your room is still all together. We don’t plan on dismantling it anytime soon, unless you want us to.”

Char tearfully lets out a relieved laugh to herself. “Do you know why I rushed Ryan to get married when I did?” She lifts her head, finally meeting her mother’s gaze, “because I knew if I didn’t, I’d change my mind. I do love him, believe it or not. I love him a lot. I’m just...” Her chin begins to tremble, finally losing her hold on her own emotions, “I’m never going to just...be okay and normal...and that isn’t fair to him.”

Bernie closes the gap between them, wrapping her arms around her daughter to hold her tenderly. “There’s no such thing as normal, my darling Charlotte.” Her voice just above a whisper, soothing and calm. She absently sways with the young woman, like she used to do when her children and even Cole were small, “I know for a fact that Ryan only wants you to be happy...and, right now, that doesn’t seem to be the case.” When she feels Char leaning against her more, she carefully lowers them both to the floor.

“I love this house. I love my husband.” Charlotte mumbles, knowing she’s trembling at this point.

“Has something happened?” A part of Bernie finds this sudden change to be weird, she seemed fine not terribly long ago. They’ve been sitting here for a bit, but it was only maybe an hour prior. “Charlotte, did something happen between the two of you?”

“No, but it will. It always...always happens.”

“She keeps saying that, but I’d never...never in a million years harm her.” Ryan says from the doorway, “she doesn’t believe me though.” He swallows, stepping inside the room and leaning against the wall.

Bernie lifts her head, looking over toward the man, “she’s been like this?”

“She has moments.” He shrugs, “she was excited when everyone agreed to come round for dinner. So...past few days Char’s been...great. I thought...she was having an episode before and now she was doing better.” Ryan bites the inside of his cheek, “when we were married, it was very...sudden. We had turned in papers months ago and...I wasn’t in any rush. We could have stayed engaged for the rest of our lives for all I cared, but...that isn’t what she wanted.”

“Why didn’t you phone one of us?”
“It wasn’t my place.” Ryan slowly lowers himself to the floor, moving closer to them. “I know she has moments and I know they go away. I don’t, however, know the triggers...or even if there are triggers.” It pains him that his love was in any sort of distress, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Serena is...better than I am at this.” Bernie shakes her head a little, “she’s figured out my own daughter better than I have, but I’ve been trying. We recognize crowds are a big one, watching telly when there’s footage of the attack airing, going to a shop of any sort now.” She swallows, “unless I’m with her, she won’t even attempt it with Serena anymore. Which, you couldn’t have possibly known. I doubt Char even realizes.” She looks down to her daughter, still in her arms. Char doesn’t seem like she’s terribly aware of what’s going on around her at this point. Bernie clears her throat, taking a moment before she speaks, “has she watched over Cole like this?”

Ryan shakes his head negatively, “not that I’m aware. Like I said, she’s been fine the last few days. Greta watched over Cole a day before that. I dropped him off over their place and I picked him up when my shift was over.”

“And Serena and I had the other days.” Bernie finishes for him, releasing a breath she wasn’t aware she was holding.

“When I’m home, she’ll want to go to get things for the house. She...stays close to me while we’re out, but...it’s obvious she’s uncomfortable during those times. I’ll insist we go home, but she’ll refuse. I never thought it could have been affecting her to this degree.” He swallows, moving closer to his wife. Ryan covers his face with a smile for her, “Ms. Wolfe,” he’s surprised when she looks up to meet his eyes, “how about going to your parents’ house for a bit? You don’t even need to come back downstairs if you don’t want. You can nap until your Mums are ready to leave. How does that sound?”

Char nods a little, letting him take her from her mother’s arms to gather in his own to pick her up, knowing her mother wouldn’t be far from them. She doesn’t know what she feels. Maybe nothing. She does, however, feel tired. Exhausted. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no need to apologize. Your Mums said they need your help around the house...even if that means you’ll be sleeping most of the time.” Ryan smiles a little as he carefully carries her to their room, “want me to bring you up a bowl of ice creams? I know you haven’t eaten in a while and you’re always wanting ice creams lately.”

“With milk?” Charlotte offers him a soft smile as he lowers her to their bed.
“Chocolate ice creams with milk. Of course.” Ryan grins, leaning down to place a soft kiss at the corner of his wife’s mouth. He moves from the room, catching Bernie taking a moment in the hall, “I have no expectations for our marriage. She’ll guide that ship, but...no matter what, I’m always going to be there for her. I’ve promised her that...and I don’t break promises.”

Bernie offers a small nod with a subtle smile, “Thank you, Ryan.” She pauses, “by the way, I am absolutely thrilled she married you. It just seems so...abrupt, but...it’s always the outcome I wanted for the pair of you. Ever since Cole was poorly and in hospital...I knew.”

“Me too.” Ryan gives a sad smile, finally moving away from her to return to the crowd of people on the floor below.

Chapter End Notes

So, should we do the first chapters of the new story (continuation of this same AU) on Wednesday or Saturday?
Chapter 149

Chapter Summary

Serena doesn’t need words to share her hypothesis with Bernie, who seems to be on the same wavelength.

After pressure from her parents, Charlotte does something she didn’t think she’d need to do.

Chapter Notes

Later the same night as the last chapter.

Serena holds Charlotte in the young woman’s bed within the home she shares with Bernie, absently stroking her dark blonde hair. She doesn’t understand the sudden turn in the young woman’s mental state. Sure, she had been living with her husband as of late, revamping the home that the man had purchased for them to grow old in. “Do you want to watch a bit of telly?”

“A mystery,” Char responds quietly, seeing her mother enter the room balancing bowls of ice cream against her.

“Come on, up and up. Can’t eat lying down.” Bernie offers her daughter a soft smile, “you’re going to be made out of this stuff soon.”

“Well, there’s other ways you can sneak sedatives to me, but this is what you’ve chosen. Better than those smoothies you used to make...with the spinach.” The young woman sees the surprised looks on her parents’ faces. “Also, it’s all I want lately...making me fat.”

“Making you fat?” Serena furrows her brow, “where?” When Charlotte pulls her shirt tighter against her torso, Serena shakes her head negatively. “Hold on a moment, Charlotte, lie back.”

“I’m going to drop these.” Bernie mumbles, setting the bowls of ice cream onto the bed, hoping they don’t tip over.
“Why?” Char furrows her brow.

“Humor me.” Serena sighs, watching as the young woman does as she asked, “You’re only gaining weight in one section of your body.” She gives a quick glance to her wife before she continues to speak with the younger woman, “do you remember anything about when you miscarried?”

Charlotte shakes her head negatively, it’s obviously a sore subject for her as her face turns down a bit. “I was unconscious...I don’t...” She licks her bottom lip a little, “I was wearing a pad when I woke, like the one after Cole was born, but I don’t remember anything else other than that. Ryan was there, I reckon he’d remember.”

“Okay.” Serena answers calmly, gently pressing the pads of her fingers against the young woman’s lower abdomen, inching her shirt up a bit as she does, “when was your last period?”

“Serena, I’m not pregnant.” Char quickly pushes herself up to sitting in the bed, pushing her oversized cotton shirt down. “Ryan and I haven’t even...” She swallows, leaning to pick up the bowl of ice cream that her mother had set on the bed, “I haven’t been naked in front of him since I’ve gotten home.” Her voice is quiet, it’s something she’s ashamed of to a degree, “I just can’t.”

“You didn’t answer the question.” Serena says softly, “and far too late to see the state of the pad from when you were in hospital.” She meets her wife’s eyes and a thought process is shared between them.

Bernie slowly sits on the end of the bed. "Too late at this point. Shops are closed."

"I still have a few." Charlotte exhales slowly, knowing exactly what their nonverbal glances were about, "but...I don’t see the point of doing that right now. I just want to be here...and sleep and...” She starts to look straight ahead again. "I just want to sleep."

"I know you do, but I will need to give you something else. You can't take this." Bernie carefully reaches to take the bowl from the young woman only to have Char pull it away.

"It isn't that serious, Mum. Think of the times I've been pissed since-"

"Once or twice, tops, and you didn't even drink that much. It had been a while since you had previously and it affected you differently.” Bernie offers, shaking her head, “Charlotte, just take a
test, please. We’ll know for certain and-

“I can phone Fleur and ask her to have a look at you as early as tomorrow if...” Serena offers, “regardless of how a quick urine pregnancy test turns out.”

Charlotte closes her eyes now, “I want a bowl of ice cream, I want to sleep. I do not want to think or speak about this right now.” She shakes her head, “I feel like I’m tip-toeing on the ledge of a cliff and...and now you want me to do all of that?” Opening her eyes again, Char glances between the women, “it’s degrading.”

“You’re being a tad dramatic.” Serena shakes her head.

“Am I?” Char raises an eyebrow, “I’m telling you I’m exhausted and you’re demanding that I wee on a stick.”

Mumbling, Serena takes a bite of her own ice cream, “You’re so bloody stubborn.”

“We aren’t demanding anything, Char. We just...don’t think you had a miscarriage.” Bernie says carefully, “you would have been eight to ten weeks at that point. Probably closer to eight. Bleeding around that time, just a tad, can happen. Not to many women, but to enough women that it has been documented.”

“I’m saying that I’m not in the correct mental space right now to even consider it.” Charlotte swallows, falling silent for a moment as the women continue to stare at her. She stands from the bed abruptly, moving to her dressing table, then the hall without a word.

Serena raises an eyebrow, looking to her wife, “She’s right, you know.”

“I never said she wasn’t.” Bernie licks her lips in thought before reaching behind herself for her partially melted ice cream. “Did you...did you catch the part where she hasn’t taken her clothes off in front of Ryan since the attack?” She sighs softly, bringing a spoonful to her mouth, “I was like that with Marcus after the IED...for a while at least. Before...before I left the house completely. He assured me that I was beautiful and an angry red scar on my chest wasn’t anything to be ashamed of, but...it didn’t feel that way.”

“So, what changed when you showed me?” Serena begins to smirk, intrigued with the prospect of
“The way you interacted with it.” Bernie shrugs, “you didn’t try to ignore it, you...were so gentle and appreciative of every bit of me.” A smile begins to grow on her face, “and it was your first time with a woman, so that was fun.” A low chortle escapes her lips. “I’ve never been someone’s first...not with that at least.”

“And now look at us.” Serena leans forward, capturing her wife’s lips when she leans forward a bit as well. She only breaks the kiss upon Charlotte’s return.

The young woman sets the plastic device onto the dressing table, returning to the bed, “can I please eat my ice cream soup and go to sleep now?” Charlotte slowly folds her arms over her chest, "that way the two of you can continue your heavy petting."

“There was always a safe amount of sedative for you to eat one way or the other. Feel free.” Bernie gives her daughter a clever look, earning a playful nudge against her leg from the younger woman’s foot. "Do you have any idea what could have set off your anxiety this time?" It was more than just anxiety, it was a mental break.

"BBC is doing a survivor special...and they asked me to...speak. Were round the house for a few hours earlier in the week, but they were very kind." Char nods slowly, taking a sip from the bowl of mostly melted ice cream, "however, they asked me to view some security camera footage...and it uh...brought back some old memories that I didn’t want rehashed.” She licks her lips a little, “Wasn’t their fault...I agreed to it, but I couldn’t handle it as well as I thought I could.”

“I’m so sorry you’re experiencing that, Charlotte.” Serena reaches over to push some hair from the young woman’s face.

Char bites the corner of her mouth, “I was doing CPR...on you.” Slowly, her head tilts to the side as she glances in Serena’s general direction without looking directly at her, “and it went on for too long. It all...came running back when I...I was finally growing comfortable with myself. I was finally...moving on and...” The young woman shakes her head negatively, “is this going to happen every time I see something about this?”

“Possibly.” Bernie nods a little, “I won’t sugar coat things. I’ve never done that.” She offers a sympathetic smile toward her daughter, “but working with your therapist should help. Self care, mental self care should help. You just need to take things one day at a time. In due time, you’ll become less and less sensitized to it, but nothing happens overnight, darling.”
“Let’s hope.” Charlotte mumbles, finishing her bowl. They continue their small talk, but it isn’t terribly long until the young woman starts to nod off. Unable to keep herself awake any longer due to the effects of the sedative her mother had laced her ice cream with as well as the general exhaustion of the day’s events.

Serena continues to absently stroke the young woman’s hair as she gives a nod toward the dressing table, “are you going to check or am I?”

Bernie dramatically sighs, “well, I suppose.” She smirks, noticing her wife’s eye roll next to her as she stands. Stepping over to the dressing table, she lifts the plastic device. “Well, Campbell, it looks like you were right.”

“Oh, truly?” Serena raises an eyebrow, “I can’t believe...after all of that...” Her newly dampened eyes scan over the young woman’s form. She reaches over to Char’s clothed abdomen again, placing a hand affectionately against the ever so small, nearly non-existent bump. “Maybe things will be a bit different now, but they’ll always be interesting.”

Returning to the bed, Bernie leans down to capture her wife’s lips in a kiss, “With this family? Of course.”
Chapter Summary

Cole is excited to meet the new addition to his family.

Serena is bestowed an unexpected honor.

Chapter Notes

Cole proudly walks down the corridor of maternity ward, hand in hand with his grandmothers. “Almost der?”

“Just over here.” Serena offers with a tilt of her head toward the end of the hall, “you can see all the babies in the hospital through the window. Mum said she’s washing up, but should be finished in a few moments and Dad will text me. Until then, let’s see all these babies.” She sees the boy’s determined nod from the corner of her eye.

Reaching the large window, Bernie lifts the boy into her arms, “Okay, Cole. Let’s see if we can find
“Look at all that hair.” Serena smirks, wrapping a casual arm around her wife’s waist.

“Explains the heartburn.”

She hums a soft chortle, “Do twins run in your family?”

“No at all.” Bernie shakes her head, “and I asked Marcus, but not on his side either. He visited last night, also got to meet Ryan’s parents.”

“Oh? I thought he’s met them by now.” Serena continues to stare toward her new grandsons, “Cole, can you believe you’re a big brother?”

“I can’t.” Cole answers honestly, shaking his head slowly. His eyes wide, “I held dem?”

“I’m sure you can hold them in a bit.” Serena offers, standing close to her wife, Cole between them. “I must admit, I do miss those sleepless nights at times. That new baby smell...watching you fall asleep with a baby cuddled up to you. My big macho Army medic.”

Bernie starts to chuckle a little, “I can’t believe Char has three children now. It’s so bizarre to me still. Even her having one is strange to me, but I can’t imagine a life without Cole...and now life without them.” She takes a moment to look at the swaddled newborns, then furrows her brow, “I don’t even know their names yet.”

Feeling a vibration in her pocket, Serena retrieves her mobile, quickly reading the screen. “Looks like Charlotte is all set. You’ll find out their names soon enough.” She leads her wife and grandson along the corridor, toward the hospital room containing their daughter.

“I’ll just ask my parents to finish the second cot. Not that we’re going to need either cot right away.” Charlotte runs her hand through her damp, wavy hair. “I’ll tell you, that shower was proper lovely.”

Ryan grins, leaning down to offer her a tender kiss, “You really should have let me help you.” He
“I wish I would just...had them cut me open again. I was unconscious when Cole was born, so there wasn’t much...I felt until after. Luckily, Ms. Fanshawe gave me what I needed to...quell that pain.” Char nods, having never spoken about it to him. “Apparently, Cam did some skin on skin bonding with him while I was knocked out.” She hears a soft rapt on the door before her son leans himself down from her mother’s hold, “Hello there, my sweet boy.” She grins toward them.

“Ma, you hab da babies?” Cole’s eyes are large, excited, “I see dem.”

“Stopped by the window?” Ryan smirks, “I did while Mum napped this morning.” He accepts a cheek kiss from Serena, “were you waiting long?”

“Not really.” Serena moves over to her stepdaughter, kissing her forehead, “Fleur said you had a VBAC. How are you feeling?” She sits on the side of the bed, taking in just how much she looks like Bernie at this moment. Spent, yet happy. “Don’t try pushing through the pain, you know Fleur will take care of things.”

“I’m aware.” Char, amused by her stepmother’s worry, takes her son from her mother’s arms when he leans down to her finally. She holds the boy close, “I think Dad told the nurse to bring in your brothers for you to meet. How do you feel about that?”

“But I stay wit’ Gam and Nan.” Cole explains, a confused look on his face.

“Of course, you can stay there whenever they say you’re allowed to—”

“All da day.”

“Okay, Cole. We’re not talking about that right now though.” Charlotte shakes her head a little, “you have two new brothers. Like Uncle Cam is my brother and—”

“He yo’ brudder?” Cole looks surprised, glancing to Bernie, “Mumma hab brudder.”
“I’m very aware of that.” Bernie folds her arms, chuckling softly. “He’ll come around, Char. Cameron tried to make a case that you were far too noisy to live with us for quite a while after you were born. Finally gave up on it a couple years ago. So, really, Cole is doing much better than that.”

Ryan watches them, lifting his head when his sons are rolled in by the nurse, thanking her quietly. “Okay, grandmothers and Cole, allow us to introduce you all to Lane Serene and Owen Leroy.” He motions to each of them, “luckily, Owen has a tiny birthmark on the side of his head. Easy to tell the two of them apart.”

“Lane Serene?” Serena glances between the parents, “he’s...he’s named after me?”

“Of course. Couldn’t very well have one named after Gran and not have Nan covered as well...with the lot of you meaning so much to us.” Ryan smirks, watching as Cole crawls to the end of the bed to better look at his brothers in their bassinets, “What do you think, Cole?”

“Dey tiny.” Cole whispers, then bites his lip, just staring at them. “Cute.” He pauses, "Dey mine?"

"These are your brothers, bud. All yours." Ryan beams, watching all the boys together. My boys.

“Positive reaction so far.” Charlotte answers quietly, gently rubbing her stepmother’s back. She knows this is probably quite a bit for her to take in, especially when she never mentioned anything about the name previously. She leans forward wrapping her arms around the back of the woman, “Are you okay?” Char asks quietly in her ear.

Serena nods absently, never thinking she could or would have ever meant so much to this young woman. Really, anyone in the family outside of Bernie. However, they welcomed her with eager arms. She watches as Bernie lovingly inspects the babies with her elder grandson. Her eyes damp with proud tears. Serena whispers, overcome with it all, “Never better.”

"Well, go ahead. One for each of you." Char smirks, motioning for the woman to lift her namesake into her arms.

Not realizing she was just staring, Serena does as requested by her stepdaughter, carefully taking the bundle into her arms, "Lane Serene...you know, with a name like that, this one is going to make the most noise."
"It's worth it." Char nods, "the louder the better. Never a dull moment...not as if there were any in the first place, but no longer." She notices her husband taking pictures of the women, his photography hobby being put to good use, even if it’s with his mobile phone.

"But I baby too." Cole pouts toward his grandparents, offering up his arms toward his Gran.

"I'll give you a squeeze in just a moment." Bernie sits at the end of the bed, letting the boy snuggle up to her side as he quizzically peers over her shoulder. "You were this small once, you know."

"Dat tiny?" Cole furrows his brow. "My not dat tiny."

"Not anymore, of course not." Bernie fishes her mobile from her pocket, holding it out as she scrolls through the many pictures of the boy's first year of life, finally getting to one with Cole on Cameron's naked chest. "See? That was the very first time I saw you. Even before Mum saw you."

"I s'eepin'." Cole whispers a little.

Bernie hums her agreement, “You were. Babies are very tired when they’re just born, usually. So are their parents.” She tries to explain to the boy who doesn’t really understand just how different things are about to be, “and you have a very important job now, you know.”

“My do?”

Nodding, Bernie continues, “you have the very important job of being a big brother.”

“Big brothers take care of their siblings. Like your Uncle Cam takes care of your Mum.” Serena offers, sitting next to her wife. She glances to her stepdaughter, “is it about time for his feed...their feeds?” She’s going to need to get used to that, she knows.

Char shrugs, making an uncertain face, “possibly?” She places her hand on each breast, “Probably.” Char gently takes Lane from her stepmother, hearing his soft whimpers first, “can you believe I went up two cup sizes because of these two?”

“I can.” Ryan winks toward her.
“Perv.” Charlotte smirks, gently exposing her breast to the babe, helping him easily latch on.

“You love me for it.” He leans down, capturing her lips tenderly. Ryan watches as his wife feeds one of their sons. “I just...I’m still coming to terms with being a Dad to three instead of just the one. It’s weird. I mean, few months ago, I thought we lost these two. I was upset, but...I would have been far more gutted if I lost their Mum instead, no offense, boys.”

“We all would have.” Serena nods, carefully taking the other twin from Bernie when she offers him over. “However, I seem to remember a young woman who threw a tantrum over taking a bloody pregnancy test.”

“Shut it.” Char shakes her head, playfully scowling toward the woman.

Cole cuddles up to his Gran a bit better, nearly clinging to her, “But you love me, wight?”

“Always and forever. We all do. We have enough love for you and your new brothers and Gwen...all of you.” Bernie gently rubs the boy’s back. She hears Ryan quietly answer his mobile from behind her after a few short vibrations.

“You never have anything to worry about.” Serena shakes her head, standing after a moment when the newborn in her arms starts to whimper. “Well, Charlotte, this is going to be quite a challenge for you.”

“I haven’t tried yet. I’ll have to do both at the same time, I reckon.” Char curls her lip a little, glancing to her husband, “Ry, can you go in the hall for a bit?” Seeing his nod since he was still on his mobile, she waits for him to walk past. Char completely removes her comfortable cotton button-up, letting Serena help her with pillows around herself to begin nursing the other twin at the same time.

Serena subtlety glances to the scar on her stepdaughter’s chest, “Are you okay?”

“He uh...he hasn’t seen it yet. I haven’t let him. So...” Her voice trails a little, “maybe when we get home since it will...probably be inevitable with a babe to each breast.” Char sadly smiles, hearing the door open again, “Stay there, don’t come in.”
Ryan rolls his eyes a little, knowing his wife wasn’t comfortable with her body yet, even after all these months. However, he respects her wishes, “that was the publicist. They have a few offers for you to go over.” He pauses, “I told her to send them to the house, but it may be awhile until she gets an answer since-”

“I just pushed two humans through my vagina?” Char raises an eyebrow, exhaling slowly.

Chuckling a little to himself, Ryan nods, “not in those words, but yes.”

Bernie looks to her arms, Cole carefully watching his brothers eat over her arm. “They seem very hungry, don’t they?”

“I eat like dat?” Cole furrows his brow, glancing up to his Gran. Hearing her affirmative hum, he continues, “But I like toastie.” When the woman starts to chuckle, he clarifies, “Nan toastie.”

“Glad to hear it.” Char nods toward her son, “I doubt I’d have anything left after these two are finished.”

Serena rolls her eyes a little, “When you were small, yes.” She returns to her previous position of sitting next to her wife, letting Cole crawl over to her. “I’ll make you one later when we get home.”

“Thank you for always tending to him, by the way.” The young woman watches the three of them, “he was always your boy...and I mean that in a completely appreciative way.” Charlotte nods slowly, glancing to the babes at her breasts, then back up to her parents, “I don’t know what I would have done without you two this past year...seriously.”

“You’ve always got us, Char. You know that.” Bernie nods, gently rubbing her daughter’s leg through the blanket on the bed. “I reckon you’ll need our help more so now than ever before.”

Ryan listens to their exchange, not moving from the doorway. He smiles softly to himself, knowing how lucky he is. Even through all their stops and starts, a part of him knows he was always supposed to be in this family. Of course, the years will be an uphill battle. Something different every day. However, no matter what, they’d still be his family.

Chapter End Notes
Special thanks to literally everyone who has read this story over the past year, to those who have offered kudos, and to those who have commented. All of it means so, so very much to me. This story started as a thought that I couldn't get out of my head without writing down and, at first, was going to be a murder mystery. Which would have been something completely different probably. *shrug* Then things happened and *Undefeated*, and a continuation of this relationship/family, became more important to me than anything else at the time in terms of writing projects. Quite honestly, I'm happy it did.

If you'd like to continue on with this AU family, keep an eye out for *Adventures of Cole Wolfe*, a sequel to this story occurring a little over a decade down the line, which should be posted in the next week or so. If you're reading this in the future, I hope you're enjoying it.

I love you all. Thank you again. <3

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